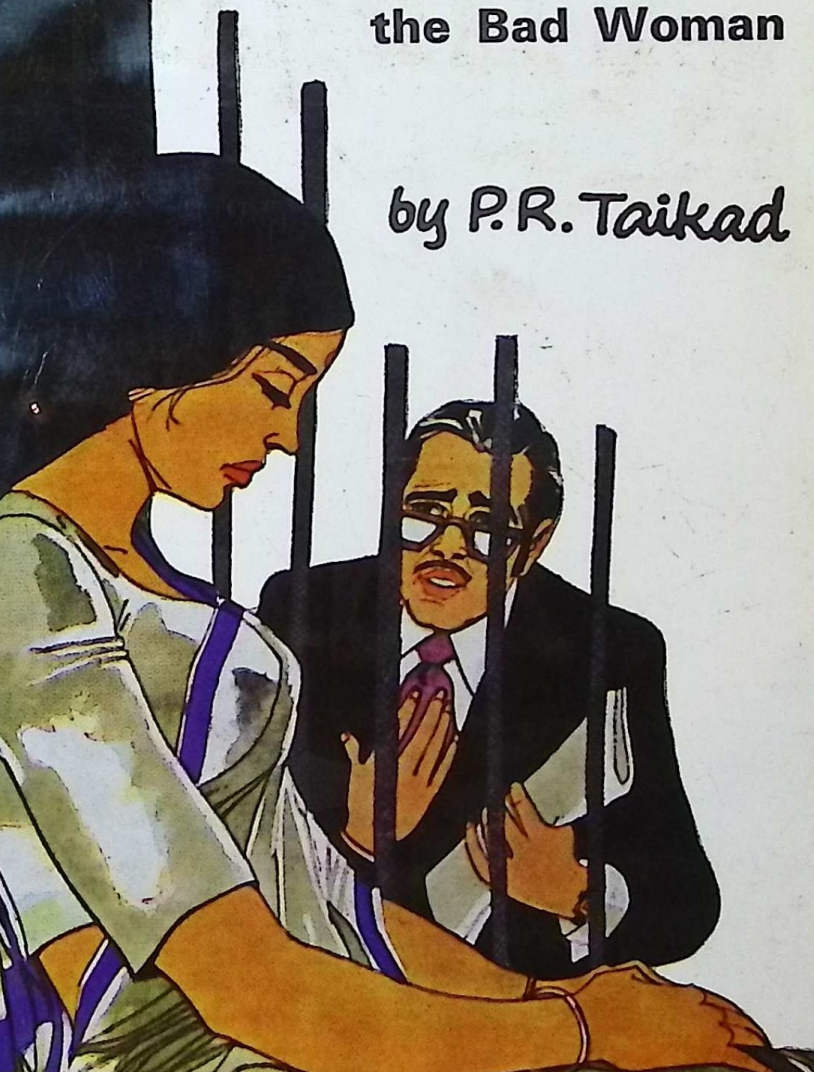
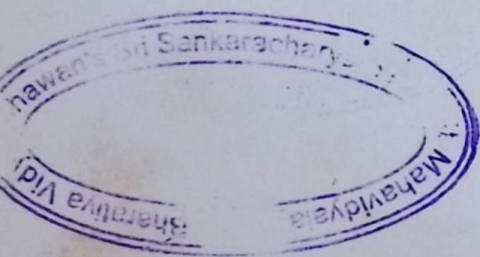


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the Bad Woman

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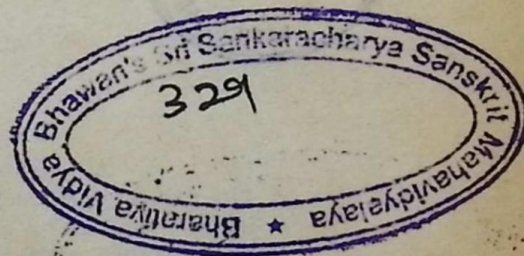




RANGAM

The Bad Woman

By
P. R. Taikad



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©

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PROLOGUE

Ever since my return to Rampur, the memory of recent events has been weighing heavily on my mind. I felt that my mother's full story must be made known to the world. I wrote to Mama in Madura and he agreed with me.

The result is this book. My mother had, whenever she had an opportunity, written down in fits of great emotion, not only reports of the events as she knew them, but her own reactions and reflections. One can feel the heat, passion, anger and fears of the moment in them. She had given these notes to Mama before we left and he later sent them to me. I am very happy he has been able to hunt up his own old notes which he had kept in meticulous detail on facts as he knew them.

We decided eventually to compile these in alternate chapters so that the two narratives would supplement and complement each other.

I hope that those who may read these chapters may, like me, learn that law does not necessarily always coincide with justice.

Collector's Bungalow,
Rampur (U.P.)

Shyamala M. Rao

But there was one problem. Rangam was nearly a year older. Mr. Gopalaratnam was really very fond of his sister's daughter and he felt that her marriage too could not wait. His wife agreed with him for a very different reason. She argued that if Rangam was not married earlier, they might be held guilty of discriminating against Rangam, regarded by all as "a helpless orphan child."

"I think," she said, "sometimes, it is good to be an orphan since an orphan has everyone's sympathy — and that girl is clever to exploit it too. Our children are simply stupid." That was her style of affection for Rangam.

Her uncle was under considerable mental strain since Rangam too was growing up fast and this was conspicuous with her excellent health and her problem that way was very urgent. Considering everything, both her uncle and aunt came to the conclusion that Rangam's marriage must be hurried through somehow and then they could think of their own daughter's marriage.

As ill-luck would have it, before many days passed, Rangam "attained age" as the phrase goes. Her uncle and aunt were in an awful predicament. During her periods, she had to be kept segregated according to custom, and could not be sent to school. This custom was a must in all orthodox families and her aunt was vexed and confused and such was her plight that the poor woman did not hesitate to put the blame on Rangam as if she could have helped it. The urgency of her marriage became acute after this episode and the couple were at a loss to know how to keep it a secret from their neighbours.

Help, however, came from an unexpected quarter when an aged relative from a neighbouring village, twenty miles away, came on a visit. When Mr. Gopalaratnam took him into confidence about the crisis, he suggested that there was a young man in his village who had also no parents. He had been helped in a small way by some villagers to start a small eating house, a "club" as they called it, a one-man show with some snacks which he could prepare at home each

day with help from his neighbours and carry them to his little shop on the main road. He could make tea and coffee there and, as days went by the old man said, he did have some custom.

"It is not a big thing, but if the fellow is lucky, it can prosper" he said. "There are odds against it, however. Samban — that is the young man's name — is a murr and he is not making a good job of it. The eats are no good and he is slow and hesitant and does not know how customers cheat him. Actually, he is something like a mentally undeveloped but physically grown-up man. People have been advising him in a joking way to marry so that there can be at least some one to help him in the work at home. Nobody means it seriously, knowing well that no one would give his daughter in marriage to him. But Samban himself is most happy at the suggestion. There is one extraordinary thing in his favour. He is a good-looking fellow, fair in complexion and he has a terribly deceptive look of intelligence and it will take some time for people to realize that he feels always taken by surprise or confused and thereafter becomes more or less inarticulate. He has had absolutely no education and has managed to eke out an existence after his parents died by being an errand boy in the local temple.

"It is not a proper alliance at all, Gopu, for this bright girl," the old man said. "But what can you do? She is not your daughter and you have your own burdens and you have no money. I think I can fix up with Samban and we can have the marriage performed in my wife's village where no one knows you and we can save a lot of expense. The more I think of it the more convinced I am that this is a good and practical solution. First, no questions about pre- or post-puberty. Samban won't know till he is told that there is such a thing as that. Second, Samban has a God-given advantage. When his poverty-stricken parents died half by penury and half by ill-health, they left Samban a house, a ramshackle old thing — what else can you expect? — but it is a roof over his head

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with a small porch like room at the front, a bigger room which would pass for a hall and then a kitchen and a small sit-out at the back which is actually some over-flow space for odds and ends. It is better than nothing, of course, and you will be relieved of a big problem, as this girl can find an immediate shelter after her marriage. On the whole, Gopu, I think it is God showing the light for you."

Mr. Gopalaratnam agreed with the wisdom of the old man, though he was very unhappy about having to sacrifice his sweet niece to such a "no-good" boy. Since the old man said it was a hit-or-miss chance, they decided to keep the idea a secret for the moment. After returning to his village, he promised to fix up everything with Samban and write to him. They could then take further steps without any delay. Gopalaratnam did not even tell his wife about the project.

The letter which reached him the next week was in the affirmative. Samban, it would seem, had jumped at the idea — an educated wife from a good family! The clever old man told Samban not to whisper about this to anyone at the peril of his remaining not married. In fact, not being sure about Samban's discretion, he kept him like a prisoner in his own house.

Mr. Gopalaratnam now took his wife into confidence and told her the story of Samban. Unlike her husband, she was not very much troubled by her conscience as her primary concern as a mother was with her own daughter rather than her husband's sister's daughter, which was how she always referred to Rangam in her mind to convince herself of the limited nature of her obligations to the girl.

Rangam's marriage was thus fixed without her knowing anything about it, though the intelligent girl guessed that something was afoot as she found her aunt in unusual cheer.

The old man arranged the marriage to be performed, as he had indicated in his wife's little village, some forty miles away, which was an obscure place, far from all familiar environment. And finally, one day, Gopalaratnam called Rangam privately and told

her about the proposal. He told her that the young man was not a very bright fellow, but what could he do without money to get a suitable boy? He hoped and prayed to God that Rangam would make a man of him with her wisdom and good sense.

Rangam told him quietly that she knew he would do only what was good for her and added cheerfully that she was sure she would be happy. The poor man, who sincerely loved his niece, was almost moved to tears by the good nature of this girl who had placed so much faith in him while he himself was not being quite fair to her. He thought of his own large family and his extremely meagre income from his job as a village primary school teacher and consoled himself that it was all God's will.

Rangam was too shy to convey the news to any of her teachers, though they were all, without exception, very kind to her and interested in her welfare. Not until her cousin, Lakshmi, told some of her friends did the news reach them. They asked for particulars and when they learnt the truth, they were shocked. She was in her pre-school leaving stage and, in another year, would qualify to join a college. And she was so bright that, without any financial help from anyone, she would perhaps go through college with her scholarship as hitherto. In fact, one or two of her teachers were so upset that they declared that they would protest to her uncle. It would be a crime to get this talented girl married to an illiterate village nitwit.

Rangam was greatly concerned over this unexpected reaction among those who were very kind and friendly to her and she told them that her uncle was a very poor man and the only way in which she could show her gratitude to him for all that he had done for her was to lighten his burden by accepting his decision and enabling him to attend to his family. Two of her teachers, however, decided to meet her uncle and, without telling her, had a talk with him.

The poor man wept after hearing them speak about Rangam and narrated to them her story from the beginning, his helplessness, his talks with the old

man and his conviction that it was a bad match for Rangam and confessed that he would have no peace in the house unless Rangam was married off. The teachers realized after all this talk that nothing could be done and, as the old man had said, it was the will of God. They were miserable, but there was a limit beyond which they could not also go. But they got an assurance from the uncle that, although the marriage might be performed, Rangam should not be sent away with her husband until her school-leaving examination was over. They offered to pay her examination fees and help her in every way possible for her to complete her course. One of these teachers was particularly fond of Rangam and she herself had not only respect but great affection for him and he told her that, wherever she might be, he would try to help her.

And so, Rangam's marriage took place in this extraordinarily sad setting. There were no crowds and a local temple Nadaswaram troupe, practically for no money provided the essential orchestral music. Her uncle and even her aunt were most down-hearted after seeing the bridegroom and talking to him. To Rangam's great surprise, her teacher Sundaram who had always been especially kind to her, came to bless her on the occasion.

When Rangam saw the young man, she felt more sympathy for him than for herself. On his side, the old man and his wife with two or three other equally aged couples (who had their own concept of marriage and were unhampered by considerations of compatibility or such other unorthodox considerations) apparently mobilised by the sponsor for the occasion, were present to make up a gathering. Samban, the bridegroom (his full name is Sambasivan) seemed so lost and was almost in disbelief that he could be a married man. He was a little proud too and, as he put the garland on her, he smiled at her, which was not a very common or polite gesture for such a solemn occasion, as both the bride and bridegroom, according to the rules, were supposed to be shy and reserved.

It was only then that Rangam realized that her

young man would need a lot of "looking after." He had been given a new set of clothes for the occasion, according to custom, by her uncle and she herself was dressed up in a saree which was all the time slipping down as she had never worn one before. Also a saree is held in position at the hip, but the poor girl had not yet developed a figure. She was barely thirteen. Her uncle could not give her any gold ornaments except a small thirumangalyam which had to be in gold. Later I knew that that piece of gold was also a present from the teacher Sundaram who came for the marriage. Beyond this, all she had was imitation jewellery. Rangam was happy, nevertheless and when she, along with her husband after the holy ceremony, gave, their pranams to her uncle and aunt, he touched her forehead and whispered in a voice choked with emotion: "May God be kind to you, dear child."

She smiled at him and said: "I am very happy, Mama. My father could not have done more for me." She knew of course that her father could have done much more for her, for he had a better job as a clerk in the Registrar's office and also had some savings which her uncle took over along with the guardianship of the girl.

When they were all preparing to leave, Samban held her by her upper arm (another evidence of breach of rules) and asked: "Can't you stay with me? You can see how I make all these eatables." Rangam was very much embarrassed as others were watching, and freed herself. But just when their bus was moving off, she saw how helpless he looked and smiled at him in a gesture of reassurance.

When Rangam returned to her home and school, she had the thirumangalyam round her neck tied in a yellow string and a necklace of glass beads. She was wearing a half-saree over her skirt to school according to custom and a choli instead of a loose shirt she used to wear earlier. She wore an ear-ring too and *kumkumum* on the forehead. These were all the embellishments of a married woman. On her face, despite her usual cheerfulness a shadow had crept in,

for what lingered in her mind after the wedding was the picture of a young man in great distress. Her teachers were not surprised and did not refer to the subject, but showed a new consideration for her as she was now a married woman and her circumstances were known. But gradually she wore down the reserve in a brave effort to resurrect all her natural gaiety.

At home too, her uncle and aunt showed her special consideration, especially the latter who was now sure that it would be only a question of time before her husband's sister's daughter went to her own house whatever that might be. There were more often discussions about the prospect for Lakshmi's marriage.

Now, let me refer to the two men who brought Rangam close to me at this stage. One was this teacher Sundaram who is related to me. He is older to me by a good six or seven years or so, but we are more friends than relatives. One day, Sundaram wrote to me urgently asking for my professional services — I had a good name as a lawyer though I was very young then — to defend a clerk in their school, who had been unjustifiably charged with criminal defalcation. Sundaram told me that he was certain that the poor man was innocent. Sundaram was right. We caught the real culprit subsequently.

It was during one of my visits to this school that I first saw Rangam. I had a shock. I thought it was my sister Jaana who was standing there, Jaana who had died on my lap after falling from our balcony. I could not get over the idea that here was Jaana come to life for me.

I asked Sundaram about this girl and he told me her story. Whenever we met thereafter, I used to inquire about her and what I have narrated is what Sundaram told me from time to time. Apparently, Rangam was his favourite pupil and the tragedy of her marriage had greatly affected him. He was the man who had struggled to prevent it as much as possible. He is a widower and confessed to me that he had found her so sweet he wanted to marry her, but the age gap was formidable — twenty three years

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The other man I referred to was Maadu, an old classmate of mine. We had been very dear friends but he had gone away to Bombay soon after we left college and then got a job in Bombay. He seldom came south and we had not met after those days. It was a delightful surprise therefore, when one day he called on me. He had received an invitation for Rangam's cousin Lakshmi's marriage and wished to attend it as he hoped to meet old friends and relatives whom he had not met for years. I had also received an invitation — Maadu had spoken about me to the family — but I was not quite sure I would go. I knew Rangam would be there and I was torn in my mind between the wish to see her and a sense of disbelief. It was Maadu who tilted the scale. He forced me to join him when he went for the function.

"At least give me your company, Nana* he pressed. "After all, the Court is in vacation and Mr. Narayana Shastri, Advocate, is certainly prosperous enough to afford a holiday."

That was how I went for that wedding and that was how my link with Rangam began. Two days later, Maadu and I were marching with the marriage procession bringing the bridegroom to the bride's house.

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to them — smiling at them out of their wits. Any other girl may perhaps have turned sullen. Indeed, she is a prize. She has spirit, charm — and, well, sex.”

“Maadu, you are my dearest friend, but never say that again,” I said. I knew I was over-reacting, but I could not help it. I think that was the moment of my crossing-over into some kind of an emotional relationship with Rangam. Her reminding me of Jaana, her sad story, her spirit, touched some strange chord in my heart. I felt there was a link between us. I almost thought of her as Jaana. I could not bear to hear any light comment about her.

“Don’t misunderstand me, Maadu,” I told him. “I shall tell you something you may regard as odd, but I cannot get over the feeling. The fact is that Rangam seems to be a re-incarnation of my sister Jaana who died two years ago in an accident. Rangam was like that when I first saw her and I have been trying to fight that image out of my mind. I cannot take my eyes off her. She has the same height, the same face and the same temperament. I am quite puzzled.”

Maadu smiled somewhat incredulously. I felt we were not on the same beam. I stopped and changed the subject; and he did not pursue it. But Rangam was on my mind. I wanted to talk to her, but how to talk to someone, and that a very young girl barely in her teens, with whom and whose family I had never had any kind of contact. May be, in two years, my own Jaana’s features had become blurred in my mind and I was making a mistake about the resemblance. But there was certainly something totally arresting — the nose, the eyes, the mouth, the laugh, perhaps the composite expression, the mannerisms, the way she turned her face and looked. Well — I don’t know how to express what I felt.

No, I said to myself. Jaana died and I saw her die with blood on her head. Jaana was dead. Rangam was Rangam, not Jaana. This must be a passing fancy — a striking resemblance, it was true, but an illusion. I must get over it. But Rangam stuck to my mind, reminding me of Jaana.

Chapter 2

I hate the way he looks at me — stares and stares as if he is seeing my body through my saree. I shall kill him. Of course, I shall kill him if it comes to that. Why not? There is blood on my hands already. Don't I know it as much as the others.

In two years of jail, that is one thing I have learnt. Give it back to them, give it back, and when they know you are in there for murder, they do flinch a bit. That warder Vasu, he would have had it, but luckily for him and for me too, I suppose, he was transferred.

The big man here, the Chief they call him Superintendent, is very kind. He does not talk to me, but keeps an eye on me. I know that. First, I thought he too was like the others, waiting to get me alone for a while. But I learnt I was wrong when I heard him rebuke a dirty, vulgar snake cracking jokes at me, that he would get him flogged and charge him besides. Since the devil was due for release, he got scared about an extended term and kept away. It was then that I felt convinced that the big man was really kind-hearted.

But, you know, there is something crude about kindness. It is feudal in its genre. Yes, I do think so sometimes. It is not a universal quality. A poor man, for instance, cannot be kind to a rich one, can he? No, it is always the other way about. I have a feeling that a man who has raped a woman casts a glance at her kindly. There she lies, defeated, lost, and he is the one who has won. When Satti lay there bleeding through his eyes and nose and his broken skull, I looked at him for a moment kindly: 'There you are, fellow. Laugh now if you like! I was triumphant. Poor fellow, he had had it.'

People often mistake love for kindness. My teachers were not kind to me, but they love me, just loved me; and so did my poor uncle, now gone in smoke and ashes.

This man Narayana Shastri became Vakil* — I don't know now. When an accused is too poor to have a vakil for defence, the judge appoints one, it seems. But I did not want a vakil. Where was the need? I had only one word to tell the Judge: Guilty. The judge looked at me, I thought, with surprise and sorrow. I don't know if you know it — when you are in the dock as an accused, you see all kinds of things — in fact you see anything you want to. You get away to some imaginary place and then come back, you get away and come back — it is like that I looked at the judge, and I was a little amused. Even a criminal can be amused, take it from me. I don't know why people look at me like that — commiserating. In what way am I different from the other criminals? Perhaps, he wanted me to say "Not Guilty" and break into tears. Break into tears after getting my soul back!

Poor Narayana Shastri came to me as I stood holding the bar firmly with my hands, my jaw set, my eyes wide open and I pleaded: Guilty.

"No, no," he whispered to me. "Why do you say that? You have a defence. You have a case. I shall find out."

I turned and looked at him for an instant. He was flushed and looked tense and harried, hanging on my lips as it were, for me to say something he wanted. Then I looked at the judge and, thereafter, at no one in particular. I was just tired and wanted to be taken back to my cell.

To my great relief, Mr. Shastri sought an adjournment and some police officer without uniform — the Prosecutor, they told me later—vehemently protested. I never looked at him. I am sure he looked more of a criminal than I did, judging by his raucous voice. But the judge allowed the Vakil's request. And I was taken away.

The first thing I heard the next morning was that the Vakil was there again to meet me. The warder came to take me to him. I had to go. I had no choice, but I did not utter a word.

That was the fifth or sixth time he was meeting

* Advocate.

me and I had not spoken one word to him. His attitude was strange. He was begging, imploring. I would look at him now and then and I felt my mind was getting disturbed and would never look at him again, but keep looking down.

"What did you tell the police?" he asked me.

No answer.

"Are they treating you well? Are they hurting you?"

I looked at him. I thought he was going to cry. I turned my face away.

"Rangam, why do you do this? Won't you speak to your lawyer? I have to defend you."

I looked at him straight on his face, but did not utter a word.

He requested the warder for a chair and one for me. "The accused cannot sit," the warder told him. "Actually, she has to be in handcuffs. The police have said she has a violent temper. But on your special request, the handcuffs have been removed."

"If you can't give her a chair, I don't want one too," the Vakil said.

Again, we stood looking at each other for several minutes without uttering a word.

"They say you used to be a talkative girl. Why are you observing this stony silence when you need to do all the talking to save yourself?" the Vakil said.

I said nothing. What was there to say? I had told the judge all I had to say.

"Rangam, you have killed two people. The punishment is hanging. Don't you think of your child?"

I uttered not a word.

"I am trying my best, but what can I do, if you don't talk," he began again.

"Tomorrow you will be in Court again and the trial will begin" he continued.

"Trial?" I asked. "No, there is no need for a trial. I will be sentenced."

"At last, at last," he exclaimed. "You have said something. No, Rangam, there has to be a trial. The

Prosecutor will present his case. Then witnesses will come. Then I shall call my witness. This will take some days."

I looked at him and remained silent. After a while, I asked : "Will my husband come?"

"The police are bringing him as a witness," he said plaintively.

I reverted to my silence and then an odd thought flashed across my mind. My child, they should not bring her. I became agitated and asked him lowering my voice :

"Will you do a favour for me, sir? Can you keep the child away from the Court? I don't want her to see me. I have heard that some children, even at three and four, remember certain things they see. I don't want her to remember me. Please, can you help me?"

"Well if you are willing to talk, the child need not be brought. Otherwise, the police may bring her. You know, the police are hard-hearted."

After a pause, he asked again :

"What did you tell them?"

I remained silent again. I must have registered a shock about the child being brought to the Court. I dreaded it. No, no, O cruel, cruel God, at least do this bit for me, I told myself.

The Vakil looked at me and said : "You are an educated girl, Rangam, and you are a wise girl and a good girl. Please think again. Talking will do a lot of good for you and will help you."

I was not called to the Court the next day and four or five days thereafter. But two days later, the warder came and quickly put on the handcuffs. "The police want you," he said. "They will murder me if they see you without the shackles."

There were two huge men in uniform looking like the very devils with batons in hand. They were accompanied by three policemen with sticks.

"Well, you bitch, tell us what happened. Otherwise, we will make you talk. We will crush your beautiful breasts to pulp." One of them said in a

menacing tone. One of them caught hold of my hair and shook me violently. I must have fainted, for I did not know what happened after that.

When I came to, I was all wet as if I had bathed. They must have thrown water on me.

The two officers were seated looking glum. Then one of the police constables said in a kindly tone :

"Don't be afraid, Amma*. They are angry only because you don't talk. Usually, accused people fall on their knees and cringe and say they are ready to say anything. It is true you have said you killed them, but you have not said why. You see, they have to present a case to the Judge. It is not enough if they merely say you have confessed to the killing. The case will be incomplete unless we present the motive. What is the motive? We want your co-operation only to that extent. Then, we won't trouble you."

Then one of the officers — not the one who threatened me — said. "We have asked your husband. He seems to be a nut. He began to cry and shriek when he saw us. We gave him cool drinks and promised to help him re-start his "club" and then he said he thought you were coming to kill him because he could not run the club. We discovered that there was no use in talking to him. We are briefing him now how to give evidence. But we want to know the motive."

"I was a little concerned : "Are you going to punish him?"

"Not if you tell us the real motive, why you hit them with that crowbar which could have killed an elephant? Why did you do it?"

I thought for some time and felt it would be best to shut their mouths with something. I said :

"You see, I was in the inner room and could hear what they were talking. I listened. They were mocking him, asking all kinds of vicious questions. The poor man was blinking and saying 'yes' to everything

* Literally, mother ; also a courteous form of address to any woman.

they said. They made him understand that he owed them money. He had to shut his hotel because nobody — except perhaps a few good people — paid him. And now, here they were telling him that he owed them money. It is true we owed some small amounts — who would give my poor husband any large credit? — to some shop people, but not to them. They were clients who came and ate their fill and went away without paying. I had known about that from some others in the village. I was enraged when they said that.

“But that was not what made me mad. They began teasing him and asked him to describe how he managed to produce a child. My fever was rising and I lost control over myself when the poor man actually began a description.

“I looked round and the crowbar was the only thing I saw. It was not a very heavy thing and I was using it for de-husking coconuts. I clutched at it and dashed into the room where they were sitting and smote at them, once, twice, many times. They were taken utterly by surprise. I did not know how long I hit them. The whole place was full of blood and there was blood on my saree. Then I threw away the crowbar and went inside and sat in a corner. My child came and sat on my lap. I patted it on the head and she was prattling, saying all kinds of things and I was speaking to her. She is about four and can talk. I did not know what was going to happen. I knew killing people was murder and I would be sent to jail. I waited.

“Then my husband went out to call for help. And a number of villagers came, a whole crowd. And someone said they should inform the police. I was sitting there inside and some villagers came and looked at me as if I was some wild animal. I must have looked the very devil to them, I suppose.

“It was two hours before the police came. They found that one of the men was still breathing though unconscious. They put him in a bullock cart someone brought and wanted to take him to the local

doctor, but he died on the way, it seems. That is what someone said later.

"Then the police asked my husband : who did it ? and he said pointing to me, 'she'. That is all he could say, poor man. A policeman put handcuffs on me and simply said : 'Let us go. And I was taken on foot to the police station'.

"That is exactly what happened" I said in conclusion, "and you know the rest."

Then the first man who had spoken very roughly to me said : "Will you sign a confession ?"

"Of course, yes," said.

"You have to do it before a magistrate. We will type out what you said and bring it. You know English and you can read it and sign. Will you do it ?"

"Yes" I said.

"You are a fine women," he said while going. "It is a pity the judge sent you to judicial custody in jail. We could have put you to good use if you had come under custody in the police cell."

He laughed loudly and went followed by the others. The warder removed my handcuffs, saying : "What to do ? I am like a drum beaten on both sides. The Superintendent, apparently on your lawyer's request, does not want you to be handcuffed. The police were about to beat me when they first came and saw you without handcuffs. So this is what I do. Now I shall take this off. The police have gone."

Of course, I had told the police all the lies I could imagine quickly, but it was a good story. The meeting left me with an awful feeling with all the hellish memories. As I was walking along the street — it seemed miles and miles — in handcuffs with a policeman on either side, all the women came out to have a look. They all knew me and I knew all of them and, except for the last few days I was there — I was meeting them daily.

"What happened to that dear girl ? She was such a sweet playful thing. It seems she killed that Satthi, you know, the cook, and another man with

him — hit them with a crowbar, just imagine ! Of course, she is a healthy girl and full of spirit. Must have gone mad, pretty thing, a really very good girl as we all know.”

Those words were coming back to me. What do they know, those poor village women ! Again, I wanted to go to sleep and I lay alone in that lonely cell. But one cannot sleep at will. The biggest crowd is around you in your mind when you are alone — and I see them all here.

The next day I was summoned again and when my warder brought the handcuffs, I knew that it was the police. There was an elderly man who, I learnt later, was a Magistrate, seated in a chair while the same police officers who had come earlier sat at a distance. The Magistrate suggested that the handcuffs might be removed but the police officer got up in great agitation and pointed out that the accused was given to unbelievable violence and was facing the charge of double-murder.

The police officer said that the accused had volunteered to make a confession and a draft had been prepared on the basis of what she had earlier voluntarily told the police. The accused might read it first and, if the facts were as she had stated, she might read it aloud and set her signature to it, adding or deleting portions just as she liked.

“What do you say ?” the Magistrate asked me and I told him that the position was exactly as the Inspector had stated and I would read the document to myself first and see, and then read it aloud or suggest alterations.

“Would you like to have the handcuffs removed ?” the Magistrate asked.

“No, it is all right. Since I am an accused capable of unbelievable violence, I suppose, the law requires that I should be so decorated. Please give me a few minutes so that I can first read it to myself.” And I read it. I have a good memory and since the draft confession was such an absurd perversion, I read

it with curiosity and remember most of it clearly. This is what it said in substance :

I had borne a long-time hatred for the two victims because of their ill-treatment of my simple-minded husband and their disrespectful attitude to me. Consequently, on the fateful day, earlier in the morning, I had met the victims and invited them to my house to talk and settle their accounts with my husband. I had done this deliberately, working according to a pre-determined plan to finish them off somehow or other for their misdemeanour and, when they were talking to my husband, I had deliberately taken the crowbar and rained blows on them using it as a weapon until they fell dead. The statement said that I had no regrets as I felt they deserved the punishment they got and I deliberately called them home and killed them so that they would not trouble my husband any more.

When I finished, the Magistrate asked me whether the statement was on the lines of the facts I had given to the police earlier. I looked at the police officer for a moment and smiled and then told the Magistrate that the statement could not be bettered to describe a killer's motives for a crime. I read the statement loudly and then put my signature to it.

Then I asked the Police officer whether he was happy and whether what I had done was in order and any more signatures were needed. He did not reply but requested the Magistrate to authenticate the confession.

As I was being lead to my cell, I heard one of the police constables whispering : "What is wrong with this woman ? She seems to be too ready to put the noose round her own neck. God forgive me. I wish I had not been here."

When I heard that, I stopped and turned round to look at the man and smiled. I am back in my cell.

Chapter 3

If you know a lawyer in Madura who is doing fairly well at the middle level, you will not be surprised if he gets up reluctantly from bed and is as slothful as he can be, giving the picture of a tortured man pining for a holiday. Many clients have to tell a great deal about lawyers, all uncomplimentary, but, from the poor man's angle, he would call them pests but for the fact that it is they who keep his money-making mill working.

I was in a better mood than usual, however, as the Court was in vacation and I was not under pressure. I settled down to my daily run-through over the morning paper when I suddenly sat up, stunned and shocked in disbelief. The news was there in cold print, unmistakable.

GRUESOME TRAGEDY IN TIRUCHUZH YOUNG WOMAN KILLS TWO

A twenty-two year-old Brahmin woman has been arrested here for the alleged murder of two men who were in her house conversing with her husband.

This quiet little-known agraharam* was in turmoil yesterday as the news spread that this young woman, whose name has been given by the police as Ranganayaki, wife of Sambasivan, an ex-hotel keeper, hit at the men with a crowbar killing one instantaneously and mortally wounding the other. Her husband, who was sitting nearby, is alleged to have watched the tragedy helplessly.

I put down the paper, took off my spectacles and sat wondering whether I was under a hallucination. That poor girl Rangam? No, it cannot be, it cannot be true at all, I told myself frantically. How can

* Street where Brahmins reside, composed of houses in a row on either side facing each other.

Rangam kill anyone ? No, it is impossible. I read again :

The police say that they have been unable to discover any motive for the crime. According to the villagers, the young woman was a general favourite, being of a happy and cheerful disposition and was educated. She engaged herself in all the local social activities and undertook an active role on festive occasions and went to the temple for worship every day. It was known that her marriage was an unfortunate one though she had a four-year old daughter, since her husband was uneducated and had proved a failure in every job he had been engaged in, the last one being a small restaurant which had proved a total loss. But the young woman, it would appear, was never heard to grumble and managed the house with whatever they had. She had planned, it was said, to start a small school for little children which would bring in some money and the villagers had assured her full support, when the tragedy occurred.

All local witnesses were baffled by the suddenness and the terrible nature of the crime.

Immediately after the incident, villagers questioned her and the police also asked her what had driven her to this fury. But she did not utter a word in reply and maintained absolute silence.

A prominent resident of the village, who had been particularly fond of the young woman, said that she looked wild with eyes dilated like those of a frightened animal but was otherwise quiet and in full control of herself. She was seated in the small inner quadrangle of the house with her child — a girl — on her lap. The little child was bewildered when the police wanted the woman to accompany them to the police station. She kissed the child very tenderly and whispered something into her ear, applied kumkumam to her forehead and did her namaskaram* to her husband on bended knees and walked out.

* Obeisance ; kneeling and touching the floor with head.

The villagers loudly protested when the police clamped the handcuffs on her. She walked through the street, past some fifty houses on either side, her head unbent and looking straight ahead as if she was in a trance. Village women watching the shocking scene were all sympathy for her, everyone saying with one voice that they could not understand how a wonderful girl like her could commit such a crime.

The local police said that the sympathy for the young woman in the village was so great that three or four villagers waited in turn watching the lock-up in the small police station to make sure that she was not subjected to any ill-treatment.

Ranganyake, or Rangam, as she is popularly called by the villagers, will be produced before the local magistrate tomorrow for remand.

Both the villagers and the police confirm that the husband Sambasivan, popularly called Samban, seemed strangely unaffected by the gravity of the crime and, when questioned, said that he thought she was going to beat him as he was not earning anything. He stood dazed when the police took his wife away in handcuffs. Great pity was shown by the villagers for the child as they were aware that the father could not be depended upon to look after her.

I read through the report once, twice, thrice, greatly agitated and then called my wife and told her the story.

"You remember my telling you about this girl Rangam? She resembled our Jaana so much that I had a funny feeling that I was seeing Jaana again. She was very much like her in her temperament also, cheerful and playful. I thought she had come back to life.

"And now, imagine this happening to that sweet girl. Arrested and handcuffed and made to walk along the street. I can't bear to think of it. Chachu*, I think, I will go and help her and take up the case. In another two hours by bus, I shall be in Tiruchuzhi

* Short for the name Saraswati.

and the police will not take her to the Magistrate before ten."

First, I went to the police station and identified myself. I told them that I would conduct the defence, but the Police Inspector in charge said that I had to tell that to the Magistrate. However, he allowed me to meet Rangam saying : "She has not so far opened her mouth. Try to make her talk. At her house before she was taken into custody, I wanted to arrest the husband also as a suspect. Then suddenly, she said quietly that he had nothing to do with it. If they wanted to know what he was capable of, they could ask the villagers. She froze up thereafter."

"Then I asked the people there," the Police Inspector said. "Every one without an exception said that he was a nitwit and could not have even known what was happening. Then we questioned him. Want to know what he said? 'Inspector, my wife is so strong she can cut down a huge tree. How she gave blow after blow on Satthi ! I was very proud. She has told me not to be afraid and, if anyone threatened me, she would speak to him. That is enough for me. You also should be careful. She is very strong.' That gave me enough proof of what he was capable of. We left him alone. You may talk to her and see."

She was sitting on the floor inside the lock-up cell when I saw her. Lord, how she resembled our Jaana ! She looked at me calmly. Her eyes were like those of a mad person, angry and desperate. She did not seem to have heard me, though she looked straight at me.

"Rangam" I called gently. "I am a close friend of your old teacher Sundaram. I am a lawyer. I can take the Court's permission and defend you. I can prove you are not guilty."

She smiled quietly when she heard that, though she did not move and sat cross-legged leaning against the wall. This put some hope into me.

"I can produce a hundred witnesses to depose that you could not have done this crime. I have seen you when you used to be a laughing and playful girl.

Everyone was admiring you on the occasion of your cousin Lakshmi's marriage. There is no one who has not been praising you."

Suddenly, she burst out into a shrieking laughter which rent the air. "Ha, Ha, Ha," she went on, her whole body quaking as if she had heard a big joke. There were tears in her eyes. The policemen rushed up hearing the noise and she suddenly froze up again.

"What happened?" the police Inspector asked.

"I reminded her what a wonderful girl she had been and how everyone used to praise her," I said, "and then she began to laugh."

I turned and saw that she had reverted to her pose of grimness and silence.

There was no use talking any more and I rushed to the Court, hoping to have a word with the Magistrate before the hearing started. I had appeared before him in some cases and he had been friendly. We had a talk and he said that the case was so serious that there was no need for any argument in the lower court and he would have to commit her to the Sessions. As for her defence, unless she had her own lawyer, the Court could appoint a lawyer.

There was a small crowd including the villagers who had been watching her and a number of newspaper people when Rangam was brought to the Court in handcuffs. My heart was pounding when I saw that sweet girl in this awful situation. The Magistrate refused to allow photography in the Court.

The Police Inspector presented a brief outline of the case together with a medical report.

The Magistrate asked Rangam whether she had any plea.

She turned to the Magistrate and without a moment's hesitation, said in good English "I have only this to say. I killed those two men and am guilty. The only other person present was my husband and he did not know anything about it."

The Inspector corroborated the statement.

"Have you any lawyer to represent you?"

Rangam remained silent.

"What do you say ?" The Magistrate asked again.

"I have no defence. I am guilty" she said.

Then I rose and submitted that the Court had to appoint a lawyer to defend her and I was in the panel of approved lawyers.

The Magistrate said he had no objection. He signed the order and committed the accused to the sessions. Rangam was ordered to be detained in judicial custody and she was taken in a police van to the big jail in Madura which was the headquarters of the district.

That is how I became Rangam's defence lawyer.

The Court was in vacation and the Special Judge on duty extended Rangam's remand for another fortnight. At home, I told my wife that I was handing over my routine cases to a colleague to concentrate on rescuing Rangam from whatever trouble she was in.

"She reminds me so much of Jaana, Chachu, I feel miserable to see that sweet girl in this plight. Some arrangement has to be made for her child too."

Briefly speaking, I assumed the responsibility of being not only her lawyer but her guardian.

First I went to Tiruchuzhi village. I wanted to meet Rangam's husband to find out what exactly had happened. Samban was not a badlooking fellow but had a vacant stare which betrayed his utter lack of depth and will. He was in his late twenties and the old man who had got him married to Rangam had apparently hoped that he would improve after marriage. This hope had not clearly been fulfilled, though, I am sure, Rangam must have changed him to some extent. I had to meet him and also the poor child.

I met Samban in the capacity of Rangam's lawyer. He was seated on the veranda of the house of the affluent villager who had momentarily taken custody of the child. No one else was around. I quietly slipped a ten-Rupee note to him saying that as Rangam was away, he might keep it for his expenses. He was alert enough to be grateful and told me that this money would enable him to go to his "Thatha"*, the

* Grand Father

old man who had helped him to start a hotel and also arranged the marriage.

"What will you do now?" I asked him.

"Thatha will tell me" he said.

"Who are those people who came to see you on that day?" I began gently.

"They were friends. All are my friends. They come to the club and also to the house."

"That is good, Samban," I responded. "That is because you are so clever and witty."

"Oh, no. I am not clever and witty, but Rangam is," he said, to my surprise.

"But the poor girl has now been taken away by the police, isn't it? Why didn't you stop them?"

"How could I? They would take me away too."

"Yes, yes, you are quite right. That man Satthi was your friend?"

"Yes, yes. I have many friends. All are my friends."

I realized that there seemed to be some soft spot here and I decided not to refer to "friends" any more.

"You spoke to him or Rangam spoke to him?"

"Oh, I talk always when someone comes. Rangam has told me that when anyone comes, I must talk. She is a woman and she will be inside."

"That is right, so you talked?"

"Yes, I told them I had no money. Shanku was very nice. He said he would give me money."

"Who is Shanku?"

"He was the man with Satthi. He is very rich and very nice."

"Why do you say that?"

"He brought a saree for Rangam."

"No veshti for you?"

"For me, he gave money. He gave ten Rupees and said he would give me more."

"That is very good. Then?" I asked in a conversational tone.

"Satthi said they would take the child and send her to school. Like Rangam, she would also be educated."

I was alert. This was sensitive ground.

"That is good," I said.

"They said they would also give me Hundred Rupees. Hundred Rupees ! Shanku was a great man. Hundred Rupees ! Satthi said he brought Shanku to help me."

"And you agreed ?"

"Of course. Won't you agree — for a hundred Rupees ?" Samban laughed. "Rangam has told me money is important. I remembered that and straight-away said 'yes'."

"But the child ? She will go, won't she ?" I queried gently.

"Rangam did not tell me that."

"So they gave you hundred Rupees ?"

"No, only ten — then. But Shanku said that they would come again when Rangam was not there and then take the child to school. Hundred Rupees, you know, is very important. I shall always remember what Rangam told me."

"Yes, yes. Rangam is very wise. What did Satthi say ?"

"He sang a song. Have you heard him ? He sings nicely."

"What did he sing ?"

"I remember very well, though I had not heard the song before."

It went like this —" and he sang : "Take the calf away and the cow will follow."

"Oh !" I exclaimed.

"You like it ?" asked Samban.

"Of course, then what happened ?"

He was losing interest. I took out another ten-Rupee note. "You may need this also. Rangam has told you money is important, isn't it ?"

"Yes, yes, you are right" and he took the money.

"So Rangam told you to take that hundred Rupees ?"

"No, she did not come out. She must have become shy."

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 “Why?”

“Satthi began talking about secrets. Secrets, you know what? Rangam has told me not to talk about it to anyone.”

“What secrets?”

“That is what Satthi asked me about — how I got the child. Satthi laughed saying I did not know. And I said I knew. How, he asked. Rangam taught me, I said. It was then that Rangam came out. I thought she was coming to remind me not to tell about the secrets. But she came and hit them both. Rangam is very strong and she gave them a hundred blows.”

“Rangam was angry about the secrets?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“But you told the villagers that you thought she had come to beat you because you were not earning anything.”

“Don’t you see I was clever? Rangam has told me not to talk about secrets. So I told them a lie. Am I not right?”

“Very clever, Samban. You should never speak about secrets. Rangam has told you, isn’t it? Suppose others ask you, suppose the police ask you?”

“I will tell them the same lie. I will not tell secrets.”

“But you told me. Why did you?”

“I forgot. You are right. It is very bad, I forgot.”

“You may forget again.”

“No, never, never. How, if anybody asks I shall simply say I don’t remember. Do you know one thing? Everyone thinks I am a fool. Rangam alone tells me I am clever and I can be more clever if I read books.”

“Now what are you going to do?”

“I am going to live with Thatha. He is like my grandfather.”

I was utterly dejected and amazed that fate should have tied that angelic girl to this unnatural simpleton. “Fate, fate” I said to myself. The more I learnt about Rangam’s sad story, the more my heart went out to

her and the memory of Jaana kept coming back to me.

Yet, I did feel that there was something peculiar about Samban. He did understand and in his own way he did think logically. He had unquestioning faith in whatever Rangam told him. He stuck to it and could even argue logically. That girl had somehow turned his mind. It was a terrible pity that this wonderful girl had to suffer like this.

With these thoughts involving me more and more deeply into Rangam's personal story, I roamed around a bit to get an idea of the environment in which she had lived. I met some villagers who all corroborated the police story. Finally, I met the village headman who was keeping the child with him. He was a shrewd and suspicious fellow and when I said I was the defence lawyer, he became very careful as he did not want to be involved in any way, even in the inquiries. Searching questions by the police had put him in a dilemma. He had nothing but good to say about Rangam (on which every articulate resident there had agreed with him) but he could not give a satisfactory answer to the police question : "Why then did this girl commit this terrible crime ?"

In reply to my questions, he said he knew only what the others also knew and as the Village Headman, he was a very busy man.

"So you are keeping the child ?" I asked him.

"Certainly not," he said becoming defensive. "I shall take her to Rangam's uncle and aunt. They must be her natural guardians, isn't it, since this fellow, her husband, cannot be of any help. In fact, I shall do this tomorrow or the day after. That town is four hours by bus from here. I am put to unnecessary expense because the child was entrusted to me as the headman here. But this cannot be a permanent arrangement."

So far so good, I said to myself and early next morning I took the bus to meet Rangam's uncle. Like all those who loved Rangam and knew her to be incapable of any such action, they were in a state of

shock, all the more miserable because they were helpless. They lived in utter poverty. The man had sold some small property, which used to bring a little income, to celebrate his daughter's marriage with an apparently rich boy. He had a number of children including an elder son who had secured a small job in Bombay and gone away. Some scholarship money which Rangam had earned had helped the family budget. This was also gone now. He managed to cling to his job as a primary school teacher.

I had really not much to talk to these people except about the future of the child. Mr. Gopalaratnam was miserable when I spoke about the problem and he was in despair about the possibility of bringing her up with old age and poverty staring him in the face.

I left it at that on the first day and spent the night with my friend Sundaram, Rangam's old teacher. I gave him a gist of my talk with the husband and revealed my suspicion that there must have been a very strong motivation for her to be impelled to such a violent action. The teacher also felt that Rangam was too cool-headed and level-headed a person to be pushed to such action at the spur of the moment. I told him about that nasty song the significance of which must have been quite obvious to anyone except her poor husband. The two rascals were clearly after Rangam and not the child. The child was the calf and Rangam was the cow. They probably thought that, with a husband like that and living in depressing poverty, she would be easy prey. They clearly underestimated her calibre and, unfortunately, she was the person who had to pay for their mischief.

Sundaram was an extremely shrewd man and asked me whether I found any particular significance in Rangam taking leave of her husband as she did — with a namaskaram — also her wearing the kumkumum before she left the house. "I would say these are extraordinary gestures at a time of tension of such magnitude as she was in. Why should she do this after killing two people and while the police were waiting to put the handcuffs on her? Well, Nana, I

can only say you should ask her. Get an answer from her and you will get the real motive."

"She does not open her mouth. What can I do?" I told him.

"You can never get at the truth unless she speaks." he insisted.

Then we talked about the future of the child. I confessed to him that it seemed that Rangam had taken possession of my heart.

"You may remember, Sundaram," I told him, "our talk when I mentioned to you that she bore a strong resemblance to my sister Jaana who died almost in my arms after that accident." After seeing Rangam and knowing her terrible story, I feel emotionally drawn to her. In fact, I am always thinking about her. I feel today that, if I allow Rangam to be hanged, I would be allowing my sister to die a second death. My God, Sundaram, when that girl looked at me from inside that prison cell, her eyes, wild and excited, were those of Jaana when she lay in my arms in shock and pain.

"Let us talk of some specific plan," Sundaram said. I could see that Sundaram who loved Rangam, was deeply in agony about all that had happened and he wanted to get away from it. He steeled himself to be calm and practical.

"In our own way," he said, "some of us, her old teachers, would like to do our bit for her. You study the legal aspects. Our evidence severally given should clear her character and bring it to a point when the judge will be confronted with the problem of the motive — self-defence or whatever it is, effective enough to save her. I don't know law, but I have a feeling that she cannot avoid conviction and a sentence. We may be able to save her life if we are adroit enough. I am convinced that Rangam's defence lies with her and she has both grace and grit and if she makes up her mind, she will convince the judge that what she did was inevitable, if not right, in the given situation. About what the situation was, only she can say."

"There is the child. What about her?" I asked.

"Among all of us, I think," I said, "I am in a better position — not only financially but taking the domestic situation also into account — than all of you to look after her and I can adopt her. I have a daughter of her age besides a son who is younger. I can speak to my wife and I am sure she will agree."

"I had a talk with Rangam's uncle and aunt and they are at a loss to know what to do. They simply cannot stand the burden. If I put the proposal to them, they will wonder how I was interested. Can you join me with one or two of your friends who are well known to Mr. Gopalaratnam to get him round?"

This plan finally worked on the plea that as Rangam's lawyer, it was partly at least my obligation to look after Rangam's interests, the most important of which was of course the welfare of her daughter. As a lawyer, I had a deed drawn up and signed by Mr. Gopalaratnam as Rangam's uncle entrusting the guardianship of the child Shyamala to me, with permission to adopt her legally as my daughter. The situation about Rangam's husband was explained in the document.

I rushed back to Madura and later went to Tiruchuzhi a day later with my wife with me. Further signatures were obtained to the document by friendly villagers certifying that Rangam's husband was not in a position to take care of the child. We presented the document to the village headman. In the presence of some village elders as witnesses, this over-cautious 'first citizen' of this village handed the daughter to us. As my wife was more or less of the same age as Rangam and, that way, bore a resemblance to her, the child accepted the plea and, in any case, presumably wanted to get away from her present environment. I noticed one thing about this child. She had not only Rangam's charm but also her extraordinary quality of perfect self-possession. She became very sweet to us when she understood that we were there to help her because her mother was not there. She did not ask any question about her mother and all the lies we had carefully thought out were not needed.

And so we returned to Madura with Rangam's daughter. I was immensely happy and could not get away from the mysterious feeling that I was having with me my beloved sister Jaana's child. So Shyamala became a dear thing to us from the hour she came to our house and got a shy kiss from my daughter Sushila whom we called Sheela. Shyamala and Sheela looked like twins. Anyway that was how they were with us from then on.

With this delicate task accomplished, I thought I was now free to prepare to save Rangam from the gallows.

Chapter 4

That lawyer came today. I had nothing to tell him, nothing to give him. Both of us sat silently facing each other across the bars. Then he began giving me news.

"Adequate arrangements have been made for Shyamali," he said.

I remained silent.

"I met your uncle and aunt. Your uncle is in an awful state. I did not know he loved you so much."

No comment. I did not even look at him.

"Ramu has gone to Bombay and got a job, but he has said he would not be able to send any money. They are suffering — they are penniless".

I looked at him but remained silent. Why all this to a dead person? I am dead, dead to myself, but they cannot know because I move about, eat and sleep. All criminals do. He says he is my defence lawyer. What is he going to do? I have done a killing, two killings, and must get the punishment. My child, yes, poor, dear, darling Shyamali, my Chomu! I am dead, my child. So, there is nothing I can do for you.

"The villagers are slowly turning against you. The police have told them that you must have been a bad girl but clever enough to hide it. One did not learn overnight to kill as you did. One would not get the nerve. That is what the policemen have said. The villagers are wondering, though they find it difficult to believe."

More news! I am indifferent. I am not condemned by rumours and opinions. I am condemned by facts, events. I bowed my head, reluctant to look at him. I was sorry for him, but why was he taking so much interest? No doubt, he was trying to help me. But why? Was he interested in my flesh? Another flesh-man? They are all after it — every damned male. He may have been my husband. They appear both to be of the same age. Yes, I do remember

to have seen him at Lakshmi's marriage. He was staring at me — I remember that. I was too young to know anything. Everyone loves a nice girl, and I was a nice girl.

"Rangam, can I ask you something? I have no motive....."

(There you are! No motive. They all say that. Satthi said that too. He only wanted — it.)

"I went to Tiruchuzhi and met all your teachers. They all want to help you....."

(What can they do? What can anyone do?)

"It was they who came with me to your uncle and persuaded him to place the child under my custody and guardianship saying I could give the child a better education than any of them. I am doing fairly well—financially, and socially. I have a wife, who is of your age or perhaps a little older."

(Be satisfied with her, why do you want me?)

"I have a daughter too, about Shyamali's age. Her name is Susheela. We call her Sheela. Shyamali and Sheela have become good friends."

(Why tell me? Why tell a corpse about her daughter? A corpse has no feeling, has it?)

"I had a long talk with your teachers — with one of them especially. He is a dear friend and has the fullest faith in you. He says if you have done anything, it must be for a good reason. He swears you will never do anything wrong."

(It must be Sundaram teacher — it cannot be anyone else. Only he understood me. He was not kind to me like the others. He loved me. I knew that. I know he wanted to marry me, but he could not because he loved me too much. He was twenty years older and he was a widower — but he did not know my uncle's plight. Still love is love, and I know now what love is, but then, I had only affection for him. He taught us Shakespeare. I was Viola to him, I was his Miranda, Perdita, Rosalind — "Viola, loving and beautiful like Rangam", "Miranda full of wonder and curiosity like Rangam," and so on, all the time "like Rangam" — I did not know then, what he meant,

but I know now.....This Narayana Shastri is bringing all kinds of old memories — gets me into a trance. I am forgetting myself. I must keep reminding myself, I am a corpse.)

“He questioned me in great detail. I told him everything I learnt just as it happened — including the calf and cow song.”

(Oh, oh ! This lawyer is a clever man, very clever. How did he know about it ? Could my husband have remembered ? Of course, he could not have known what it meant. I looked up at him and he must have seen fear in my eyes, for I must have betrayed my reaction to his being near the truth.)

“And also your wearing the kumkumum and your namaskaram to your husband. He asked me to question you about them. ‘Then only you will know the motivation’ he told me.”

(Lord, the truth, very near the truth. I could not contain myself and blurted out :)

“Please don’t bring Sundaram teacher here. Please tell him to leave me alone. Let me die in peace.”

(I bit my tongue. Why did I speak ? Was I not a corpse ? But I don’t want him to come. If he comes, he will get at the truth.)

“Please tell him. If you tell him I said so, he won’t come. Will you promise ?” I asked him in a low voice.

“Then tell me what all this means,” he persisted again.

I became silent again. I was now fully awake. I was a corpse, I told myself.

“They have all promised to come and give evidence.”

(Let them. What does it matter to me ?)

“I want some help from you. Will you promise that you will not tell anything to the police or give anything in writing to them, till you have consulted me ?”

(This is a lawyer’s elementary way of ensuring a client’s co-operation. But I am not co-operating. I

don't want a lawyer. I am guilty. I have to take the punishment.)

I merely looked at him and remained silent.

"Please think over what I said. I shall come again."

I said nothing. The poor man was struggling. He looked very sad, depressed. I didn't know why. He signalled to the warder who came and took me away.

I think I should straighten up this record a bit. I am making it a hotchpotch. If I have decided to write, why not tell the truth, as they say, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Let me clear the mix-up. I have been in jail now for two years. Sentenced to life imprisonment — hard labour. Vakil Narayana Shastri has been steady. As frequently as the law allows, he meets me. He brings news of Shyamali and enquires after my health. But he gets not a word from me. The man shows a lot of feeling on his face, grief, concern. I see that clearly, but I don't know what he wants. Nobody does such services for nothing and he has done me a tremendous lot of service — and for no money! He has sent me sarees, four in fact. And he has somehow persuaded the prison authorities here to permit me to wear them.

As everyone knows, the atmosphere in jail is coarse, to say the least. Nor is the Jail Superintendent a soft man. No man in that position can be. But from the time I came here, a special watch, I felt, was being kept over me. As a lifer for hard crime, I should have been put to hard labour, breaking stones, carrying loads etc. But I was given softer jobs — collecting clothes for laundering and keeping an account, cleaning up some rooms, sweeping and washing if necessary, all indoor jobs. After three months, I was asked to hold evening classes for the women to make them literate. A doctor who came for routine examination of prisoners reported on my "delicate condition" (!) and recommended special food, though I was among the healthiest there. I see a small hidden

hand here and I don't like it. After what happened, I can only see snakes around.

Three months ago, a parcel of books came. I was surprised, but they were my favourite authors and I must say I was glad. We have no lights here to help reading in the night but I do find some time during the day. These books were like a ray of light in a dark room. Some weeks later, the Superintendent sent for me. I had no choice but to go, but every now and then I hear nasty talk here that women prisoners have to "oblige". Last month, one of the women delivered a baby — no questions asked. Since I don't talk to anyone — I know people think I am a terrible thing when roused and they think I am easily roused. It is true. I have lost fear. I can kill, you know. I am a bad woman.

But all these thoughts were unnecessary. The Superintendent merely told me that if I could return those books, I could have more. He also gave me some paper and pen and ink — you can use them if you want to write anything, he said. He was an old man and was business-like. I felt he was conveying a message.

That is how I began writing these notes. There are some political prisoners here and they always keep reading and writing. They have 'A' Class and 'B' Class categories. But we are not allowed to mix with them. We are criminals — and I am one of the worst, with two killings to my credit! But they all stare at me. I know why. I am twenty-five. Dam, damn, damn.

I wonder sometimes whether I am able to think cogently. Am I losing my wits? It was then that I decided to write everything that came to my mind. My life is a drama with lots of scenes coming one after another. I put them down just as they came.

Yesterday, I had a dream and I dreamt about Shyamali and I woke up angry, very angry, why should I be here, away from my child? A man rapes a woman and she becomes a bad woman? Is that it? So, I have to take it, insults and more insults and

shame and more shame. I have a right to hit back and I hit back. I did — and very well.

My teacher is a wonderful man. He loved me and I loved him. Then I did not know, but I know now, now that I am a full woman. I did love him. It was that magic, that magnetism, his faith in me, his love for me which made him spot the truth — very nearly, at least to frame the crucial question which he asked the Vakil to put to me.

Yes, I must say that is the truth. For many weeks, I was an impure woman. I could not say my prayers. I could not wear my kumkumum. I felt I had betrayed my husband — I had become unclean, impure, polluted, defiled. I had become a bad woman. Why, because a man raped me. He must have smiled and gone. Didn't I write sometime back, about that look of kindness on a defeated, defiled woman? *He* raped and *I* became bad! A bad woman, not only in the eyes of the world, but in my own eyes! That is the worst part of it. You cannot run away from yourself. A shadow chased me always, a shadow of crime, sin and betrayal. How funny, crude, illogical, but it is true. You have been stabbed in the mind, in your soul. I could not pray. I could not touch my child. I felt I was polluting her. I couldn't wear my mangalya* mark on my forehead. I felt I had lost the right. I couldn't go near our pooja idols. Something pulled me back. A shrewd husband would have noted that — and then what would have happened? He would have discarded me, a polluted woman. But my poor husband was a child. He did not know. He would not know anything, till I told him.

Then I got back all I had lost when I smashed him to pulp. Once, twice thrice, four times I hit him. Blood came through his eyes and nose. His head was cut and dented. No, that was not enough — hit, hit again and again. And then the other man who had laughed, the lecher, when Satthi asked my poor simple husband to describe how he got a child. The poor

* Kumkum mark of married woman.

man began to tell : 'My wife taught me'. It was then I entered. Laugh, foul fellow. Take this and laugh — and this and this. And then, I threw the crowbar away and went in.

I was free. I was pure again. The world could call me a criminal. Let them do so. But I was free, free from pollution, defilement. That was why I took out the Kumkumum and put my sacred mark on my forehead. And I kneeled before my husband and did the traditional namaskaram. I had avenged the wrong done to me, done to him. I was the chaste wife again, though I might be away from him and though I might be hanged. Better to hang as a pure woman than live as a woman shamed and polluted.

You are right, my beloved teacher — all honour to you — and all love to you from your sweet Rangam, who could have been wife to you, if only you had been a little bad, a little unkind and a little unfair to me, forgotten the twenty and odd year gap between us and decided to ask my uncle to take me away. He would have happily given me to you. But nothing is lost, for I love you more now. Love that is lost is sweeter — some poem you read to us — Damn it, I can't remember — about melody unheard or something. I love you, my teacher Sundaram. What a sweet name! Rangam — Sundaram. You didn't like that? I ask you, you, God!

Let me put down what happened exactly as it happened. That alone will complete this report.

Chomu — I call her that you know, my pet short name for Shyamali, my dearest child, the sweetest part of me, my poor dear husband's gift to me. Yes, she was sleeping in the hall. It was hot. There were beads of perspiration on her forehead. I took out the palm leaf fan and began fanning her. I was myself sleepy. We had had our midday meal late as usual. It was around two in the afternoon.

I heard the backdoor creak. Our house in the street is one of the smallest — of course, we were the poorest people there, though people would crack a joke and say "Rangam, you are not poor. Where you

are, Lakshmi* lives." We had a small hall-like room and then a door at one side which led to the kitchen. The oven was at one end and I would cook and eat there. Shyamali and her father would eat first and then Shyamali would sit near me and I would eat. No good wife ate before her husband did.

I got up to see whether some dog had come in. It was a dog, but in the shape of a man. I didn't know it then. It was Satti, the village cook. He was not a domestic servant but undertook cooking on contract for marriages and other festive occasions. He was a big ugly fellow, always semi-naked with a veshti tied high up to reach just below his knees and a towel on his shoulder dirty and wet, his mouth filled with betel nut and tobacco. We were in the back sit-out outside the kitchen where firewood and unwashed utensils were kept. I would wash them and bring them into the kitchen in the evening.

"What, Satti? How did you come this way?" I asked in surprise but in quite a friendly tone, for he was always smiling and laughing and everyone knew him and spoke to him freely, both men and women.

"I thought this was Ramayya anna's** house," he said spitting the betel juice out into the backyard through the open back door.

"Oh, you have made a mistake," I said. "Ramayya anna's house is four houses away. How could you make a mistake? He is a rich man and their back garden is full of flower plants and fruit trees. Our backyard is bare with hardly any greens."

"Yes, you are right," he said. "But now that I have come, I shall sit for a while."

But he did not sit.

"No, don't sit here," I told him. "It is not clean here. Let us go to the front room. I shall open the front door and you will get some breeze. Come quietly, my child is sleeping."

* Goddess of wealth.

** Anna is elder brother, also a courteous term of address.

"We need not go there," he said. "Let us go into your kitchen."

"What do you want there?" I asked in surprise.

"Don't you know what a man will want from you, my golden Rangam?" He said and smiled viciously. Then I saw the lecher in him — the dog.

I stared at him not knowing what to do.

"Ever since I saw you in the club with Samban the other day, when you were telling him how to note down the account of sales, I have been wanting to meet you. I have no bad motivation, but you know I have been just wanting you," he said and laughed gently.

I felt that here was a mad man and I began to be afraid. I rushed back into the kitchen hoping to close and bolt the door. He dashed behind me, caught hold of my saree. He took me with one arm round me and crushed my breast. I cried but no sound came. Then he pulled my saree and that is all I knew. I had fainted.

I did not know how long I was there. I opened my eyes when Shyamali came and shook my head. I hurriedly got up. My saree was spread all over me and I was naked and wet. I hastily put on my saree and rushed out into the backyard where we stored water and had a hurried wash. Shyamali was howling seeing me run. I knew then I had been raped and fainted again. Shyamali kept crying and shaking me. That woke me up and I asked her to bring me some water. I drank it.

I looked at her. Shyamali was four and was a very intelligent and observant child. I looked at her face and was concerned to know whether she had been awake, but could not ask her. How could I? I was sweating all over and my heart was beating like a drum and my legs were collapsing under me.

I can't write more. I feel I am going to faint again.

Chapter 5

I met Rangam four times before the trial opened in the Sessions Court. She had nothing to tell me although I tried my best in several ways to interest her and focus her attention on coming and past events.

Only once she smiled softly. That was when I told her about my meeting with her teacher Sundaram. I had suggested to him to meet her in jail and he had asked me whether Rangam had agreed to see him. I had to tell the truth, which was actually a request from her to me not to bring him. Sundaram said that, in that case, he would not come. "I want only to see her. I shall see her in Court." I told Rangam that he had declined to come.

Then she smiled.

So far as she was concerned, it seemed, there was no need for, and there could not be, any other communication.

I rushed up to her the second time when I read in the newspapers that she had made a confession. I protested to the Magistrate that I was her lawyer and I had not been called. The Magistrate said that this was really a matter between an accused and a Magistrate and no one need be present. But if she had wanted me as her lawyer to be present, he might have allowed it.

The police were entitled to keep such a confession a secret to be presented in court and, beyond reporting that she had made a confession and narrating the earlier incidents in all their gruesome detail, the press could not give any information since the case was sub-judice.

I asked Rangam about the nature of this confession. She would not say anything, but from her expression I could see she was feeling sorry I was taking so much interest in her case. Anyway, I was glad to see some reaction. I told her everyone was baffled by her silence

and she had so many friends who were sympathetic to her, especially in the village where she had spent her earlier days.

"What has happened to you? What has shocked you? Sundaram and I know that you are not out of your mind and you have a very good reason for whatever you do. We would very much like to help and, being a lawyer, I feel I may be able to help you."

She became again placid. But for her eyes full of light and intelligence, I would have put her down as insane. She heard and understood everything and perhaps reacted to it, but was deliberate and calm and, perhaps, I should say, mentally so strong that she did not show any sign of it.

Two days later, I went to her again and told her that I would call witnesses in her favour and cross-examine them. I might have to ask embarrassing questions. I hoped she would not mind it. If she contradicted me, I would suffer a double defeat since I would not only lose the case but become a laughing stock. I did not want to bring Shyamali to the Court, though some friends had suggested that that might create some sympathy in her favour. She remained silent.

There was one more meeting and that was when I went to fortify her against any shock at seeing her husband in the witness box as a Prosecution witness. I told her that the police were briefing him. She smiled.

"Did you see him?" she asked.

I was overjoyed to hear her speak. (The image of Jaana came back to me. It was the eyes, the eyes and the smile). I said I did.

"Then please tell him that I love him and respect him as my husband. If any questions are asked, he should always tell the truth. If you tell him that I told you to tell him, he will do it. Please remember that."

She smiled again — sadly this time. This poor woman was obviously full of pity for him, she loved him and perhaps — who knows — she would have

made a man of him in the course of years. Sundaram had told me : "There can be no second Rangam in this world. If she had the choice, she would not be where she is today."

Rangam was brought to the Court the next day. The Sessions Judge, a young I.C.S. officer who had opted for the Judicial Service, seemed shocked when he saw her. Rangam was that type of girl. She attracted attention. You remember Maadu asked me only about her at that marriage procession when a hundred other women were present. Her intelligence and grace and her sparkling good humour and her good health too, which gave her a kind of beauty, must have struck him. Could such a girl be a murderess ?

The first thing the Judge told the police was to remove the handcuffs.

The usual procedure followed in a criminal case was then gone through. Madura is a very crowded city, its population made up largely of unemployed idlers and they were all in the Court to enjoy the tamasha of a good-looking upper caste woman being tried for murder. There were also a good number of newspaper people, Madura being an important district centre. The Judge was clearly very unhappy with the whole setting, his innate sense of decency revolting against the young woman being stared at and jeered by the crowd.

The Prosecutor presented the case and read out the confession.

It left me in an utter state of shock and she saw me and seemed amused. The Judge noted that, his interest being roused by this extraordinarily odd relationship between an accused and the defence lawyer. As he looked at me, he must have been struck by the fact that I did not know what the accused had confessed to the police.

"This is madness and a black lie," I exclaimed.

"Were the police present when the accused made the confession to the Magistrate ?" the Judge asked the Prosecutor who was taken aback by the question.

"No one coerced me," Rangam said from the dock.

The Judge was again taken by surprise and he did not quite like it. This was certainly going to be a strange case, he felt, as he kept looking at the accused with his fingers rubbing his chin. He looked at me and his expression almost told me : "You have a very intelligent but a difficult client." I had clearly won his sympathy which was a big point.

"I asked you a question" he told the Prosecutor.

"Yes, Your Honour, but they kept far away," the Prosecutor said.

Judge : Did she make the statement orally ?

Prosecutor (embarrassed) : She read a prepared statement.

Judge (smiling) : Oh, she brought a written statement ? Will you please explain what happened ?

Prosecutor : When the Police in the process of investigations, questioned her, she said she wanted to make a confession. Then she explained what she had to say. As the accused was in a state of agitation and was often incoherent....."

Rangam seemed amused and I thought she would burst out into laughter. The Judge also noticed that, but said nothing and the Prosecutor went on :

"We thought it might help the accused if a draft was prepared and we wrote down whatever she had said. The Magistrate asked her to read it to herself first and said that thereafter she might read it out with any changes she might wish to make.

Rangam continued to smile lackadaisically.

Judge : "Was the statement written or typed ? Did she make any changes ?"

Prosec : "Typed, Your Honour. She did not suggest a single change. The accused is well versed in English."

Judge : I thought so. I understand. You may proceed.

The Prosecutor then said that the case against the accused was so strong and clear that the trial need not be prolonged.

Judge (turning to Rangam) : You have heard the

case against you read out. Do you plead guilty or not guilty ?

"Guilty" Rangam said quietly.

Judge : How shall we proceed then ?

Prosec. : We can produce our witnesses, Your Honour, and then the Defence can cross-examine them.

Judge : That is right. Please call your witnesses.

Prosec. Our first witness is the husband of the accused, Your Honour. He is the only eye-witness to the incident.

Judge : You are bringing him as your witness. Is he allowed to give evidence against his wife ?

Prosec. No, Your Honour. We are presenting him to the Court merely to elucidate the facts. This is necessary as he was the only person present other than the victims of the murder.

The police, who had apparently kept Samban in an ante-room, brought him. He was looking terror-stricken and bewildered. He was asked to walk into the witness box and take the oath. Then Samban burst out speaking to the accused.

"Rangam, why didn't you come back ? I have been waiting for you. This man (pointing to me) says you told him to tell me that I should tell only the truth. Is it so ?"

He appeared desperate and nervous. The Prosecutor was about to say something when the Judge signalled him to keep quiet and waited, apparently to see whether the accused would reply.

"Yes, tell the truth. Try to remember carefully. Listen to their questions and tell the truth. I have told you always to tell the truth."

Samban : (Again to Rangam) But I don't remember. Rangam, will you help me ?

Rangam : (Looking at the Judge as if to get his permission and then turning to Samban) Yes, of course, I shall help you. Don't be afraid. Nobody will scold you when I am here. Never be afraid, haven't I told you ?

The Prosecutor raised an objection to this colloquy.

Judge : What kind of witness have you brought to the Court ? Don't you see he is so helplessly dependent on his wife ?

Prosec. We only want the truth, Your Honour. He has been told from every side to tell the truth.

Judge : Go ahead. You may question him.

Prosec. Samban, who were those people who were in your house the other day.

Samban. A lot of people came and also the police, I remember. Then there was Satthi and another man, I don't remember the name.

Prosec. Never mind. And then your wife came ?

Samban : Yes, she came with the crowbar and beat them.

Prosec. She beat the police ?

Samban : Oh, no, no. She beat Satthi and then the other man. That is the truth, isn't it, Rangam ?

Rangam : Yes, that is the truth.

Prosec. And then what happened ?

Samban : Nothing.

Prosec. Oh, Samban, please remember.

Samban : You remind me — like yesterday.

The Judge smiled. I kept quiet.

Prosec. You said you called your wife. Is it not ?

Samban. Yes, yes, I called Rangam. I remember now. She asked me to go out and call the villagers.

“Prosec. And then ?

Samban : Then everyone came. The police and everyone. They asked me what happened and I told them to ask Rangam.

Prosec. Then they all went away ?

Samban : No, no. They took Rangam with them.

Prosec. Your wife didn't tell you anything ? Did she say 'sorry' or anything ?

Samban : No. I don't remember. Ah, I remember she went near the pooja and applied kum-kum to her face and came and did namaskaram to me.

Prosec. What did you do ?

Samban : Nothing. Then she went away.

Prosec. The defence can ask any questions they want.

Rangam looked at me.

I. Samban, you have many friends ?

S. Yes, many. All are my friends.

I. Rangam also ?

S. She is my best friend.

I. Satthi is also your friend — and the other man who came with him ?

S. Yes, yes, very good friends.

I. They gave you presents ?

S. Presents ? No.

I. I mean whether they brought anything for you ?

S. No, not for me. They brought a saree for Rangam.

I. Good. They didn't give you anything ?

S. They gave me money — ten Rupees.

I. That is all ?

S. They promised me more — hundred Rupees. Rangam has told me I must earn money.

I. Very good. Indeed, they were very good friends. They gave you money. They also offered to help you ?

S. Yes, yes. They would do everything for me.

I. Like ?

S. I don't remember. Ah, I remember. They said they would teach Shyamali, send her to school and bring her up.

I. Who is Shyamali ?

S. She is our child.

I. How old ?

S. How old, Rangam ? (Samban asked turning to Rangam)

Rangam : Four years.

S. Rangam knows. She knows everything.

I. We know that. Now Samban, you are very good. You are giving all truthful answers. (Samban smiled proudly looking at Rangam). Did Satthi and his friend give you hundred Rupees ?

S. No, they gave me only ten Rupees. They said they would give me hundred Rupees when they took Shyamali with them.

I. I see, they said they would take Shyamali with them? So you were selling Shyamali for hundred Rupees?

S. Oh, no, no, no. I can't do anything like that. Rangam does everything that has to be done. You don't understand. I shall explain to you as Rangam does (He looked at her and smiled and Rangam became grim).

S. One, (he folded this little finger) they give me hundred Rupees, understand? Two, they take Shyamali, send her to school and educate her to be like Rangam, understand? Now, how am I selling? They will bring Shyamali back after educating her, isn't it? You understand now?

I. Yes, I understand. You didn't ask Rangam.

S. I wanted to ask. She was inside the house and she has told me not to call her when other men come.

I. Yes, I see, That is good. Then, when would you have asked her?

S. (becoming shy) Later.

I. Secretly?

S. No, don't ask me about secrets? No secrets please. I won't tell you.

I. But you told Satthi and his friend?

S. I did not. They asked me how I got my child. I told them Rangam taught me. They asked how. Then Rangam came and beat them. Lord, how she beat them. She is very strong.

I. Yes, you are very very honest, Samban. Now, one more thing. I remember. When I saw you the other day, you sang a song. It was a nice song, you remember?

S. That was not my song. It was Satthi's song and he sang. It was a simple song. So, I learnt it.

I. Can you sing it now?

S. What? With all these people here? They will laugh. I am not a singer.

I. Samban, I tell you truthfully. You sing well. Please sing, only once.

Samban sang. "Take the calf away. The cow will follow..."

I. I submit to the Court that the words may be kindly taken on record. This is very important evidence.

Prosec. This is madness. You are getting an imbecile to do all kinds of things in Court.

I. You brought him as a witness, didn't you? If he is good enough for you, he is good enough for me and the Court.

I. Thank you, Samban. You have said all the truth.

S. Rangam, I want to talk to you.

Rangam : I shall come home and then we can talk.

S. Secretly?

Rangam : Yes, secretly. Go to Sundaram teacher and be with him. The lawyer will take you.

The Judge listened to this talk quietly looking at the accused with a kind smile.

Judge : (Addressing the Prosecution) Who is your next witness?

Prosec. The officer who arrested the accused.

The witness gave all the details of the scene in Rangam's house as had already been reported. The Prosecutor sat down convinced that the murder charge had been established. Then I started my cross-examination of the witness.

I. You are a witness before the Court. I want to caution you that you are not here as a police officer carrying out orders. You have sworn to tell the truth. So, please remember to answer my questions truthfully as you have said you will.

The judge smiled and said nothing.

I. You were the first person to start the case against the accused starting with the arrest.

Witness : (Proudly) Yes.

I. You have been thereafter in charge of all investigations?

W. Yes, but under the direction of my superior officers.

I. Naturally. You questioned the accused after the arrest at the police station? What I mean is, whether you used any force.

W. It is obvious that we could not have used any force. She was in our custody only for a day. Ours is a small police station with only one lock-up cell at the front. There were half-a-dozen villagers watching the accused. How could we have questioned her, not to speak of using force?

I. You are thorough with your answers, Inspector. You didn't question her later in the police station?

W. I have already told you she was not in our custody for more than a day. When the accused was produced before the Magistrate, he remanded her to judicial custody and she was taken to the Madura jail.

I. So, you never had an opportunity to question her? That is too bad for such a serious criminal case.

W. No, we questioned her in jail.

I. In detail, and to your satisfaction.

W. I Don't understand what you mean by 'to your satisfaction'. We elicited facts about the case as she wanted to tell us.

I. Precisely, that is what I wanted to know — you got all the facts as she wanted to present.

W. Yes.

I. That is good, but you believe all that she said was true?

I looked at Rangam. It seemed as if she was enjoying the cross-examination.

The Inspector fidgetted suspecting a trick.

W. Well, what else would we believe?

I. I want an answer, not a question.

W. Yes, we supposed that she said the truth.

I. You are not sure.

W. We went by whatever she said. That is all.

I. So you are not sure about the facts stated in the confession you drafted on her behalf.

W. I never said that.

I. You are a little confused, aren't you ?

W. No, I am very clear in my mind about the truth of what I say.

I. We are concerned with the truth of what the accused said. Please remember you have brought a hanging charge. You cannot play with a human life.

Pros. The Defence lawyer is preaching.

Judge : I agree with you. You should add 'without much effect.'

I. I am very sorry, Your Honour. I apologise. I was only going to remind the witness about the importance of giving a clear answer.

I turned to the witness and resumed :

I. I was asking you about the facts in the confession. You recorded all that she told you.

Rangam was heard suppressing a laugh. The Judge was surprised but amused. The Prosecutor and the witness were greatly embarrassed. The crowd remained silent, amazed that the accused, a woman, facing a murder charge was taking it all so nonchalantly.

I. Please give me an answer. You shouldn't be hesitating if you are speaking the truth.

Prosec. I would submit to the Court that the Defence lawyer is bringing all kinds of irrelevant matters in the cross-examination.

Judge : That is for me to decide. Answer the question.

W. (raising his voice angrily) We recorded all that she said and put it in the confession in draft form. The Magistrate asked her to read it to herself first and then make any corrections necessary, and only thereafter read it as a proper confessional statement.

I. I am glad you are so firm on facts. You prepared a draft confession, you said. Is it usual ?

W. (again hesitantly) We were only trying to help her collect her thoughts. Being a simple young woman, she was in a hopelessly nervous condition and in a confused state of mind. We thought we should help her. As the Court can see, we were of help to her.

I. Good. You have been very kind. How long have you been in the Court here — today ?

W. Why ? I have been here from the beginning.

I. You did not go out at all ? Address the Court please.

W. No, Your Honour. I have been here throughout.

I. You have been watching the accused and witnesses and following the case carefully.

W. That is my duty.

I. Good. You do your duty well. Now, tell the Court whether you found the accused at any time nervous and in a confused state of mind.

W. That is not for me to say. It is for the Court to judge.

I. I am repeating the question advisedly. You judged the state of her mind. Can you tell us now how you find the state of her mind — nervous, confused ?

Prosec. The Defence is heckling the witness, Your Honour.

Judge : Is this your first criminal case ?

Prosec. No, Your Honour. I have won many cases in this same Court — before Your Honour came.

Judge : (smiling) : I am sure you have a good chance of winning cases, even when I am here — provided you show proper knowledge of the law. (Addressing the witness) Answer the question.

W. She seems to be in a better frame of mind.

I. Only 'better' ? Still a little nervous, a little confused ?

W. (Angrily) She is full of defiance. That only shows how she can easily do what even rough men would dread to do.

I. I agree with you. May I take it that she has not shown any nervousness or confused state of mind ? In fact, you said she has been defiant. In what way did she show her defiance ? Can you explain ?

W. She would not speak. She would not answer a single question.

I. Then, how did she open up ?

The witness blinked and said after a pause :
"We persuaded her eventually."

I. By threats ?

W. By talking.

I. Your Honour, may I break the procedure a bit and ask a question to the accused to keep the record complete.

Judge. I am afraid that is irregular. You can tell me what you want to ask her. Perhaps, I may ask her.

I. I wanted to ask her a clarification on two points. The witness has said, they persuaded her and they did so by talking. I wanted to ask the accused, Your Honour, what was the nature of the persuasion and the words of the talk.

Judge. It is unusual to question an accused at this stage. But I agree it is a relevant point. I shall ask the question.

(Turning to Rangam) You have been following the argument. Can you tell the Court exactly what happened ?

Rangam said calmly : They were all seated and I was standing — in handcuffs.

Judge : What did the officer say ?

Rangam : You want me to give the actual words.

Judge : Yes, that will be correct, I think.

Rangam : He said he would crush my beautiful breasts to pulp if I don't speak out.

There was tremendous excitement in the Court and the Judge himself was shocked by the brutally frank reply.

Judge : So you were threatened and you were frightened.

Rangam Yes, I was threatened, but I was not frightened. I have heard that barking dogs do not bite.

(Everyone laughed and the Judge too smiled)

Further, if he had done anything like that, that man would have been involved in a murder charge now. But I decided to speak out. I wanted to help them. You

may ask 'why'? I am not a criminal seeking to escape punishment.

Judge : (addressing me) Have you finished with this witness ?

I. No, Your Honour. I have to ask him some more questions.

Judge : The Court will stand adjourned till 10 a.m. tomorrow.

As we dispersed, the Prosecutor passed me and remarked : "You can never save her."

I replied : "You may be right. May I ask you something ?"

He said : "Any number of questions. It is a pleasure to deal with a clever lawyer."

"Only one will do," I said. "Are you interested in justice ?"

"Of course, I am," he said.

"Thank you for saying that", I replied. "I am glad to know that you will not allow this woman to commit suicide, which, I suspect, is what she is trying to do."

The Prosecutor grinned : "I hope, brother, you will not make me lose my job. A Prosecutor's worth is judged by his ability to get a conviction."

"Law versus Justice ?" I exclaimed.

Chapter 6

I am a little fatigued over this writing. But I have become so habituated to jotting down my thoughts that I feel I have not done my home work if I do not write.

This is my fourth year in jail and, though I am what is called a life convict, I continue to have a feeling that I am treated somewhat softly compared to the other prisoners. Like all lifers, as they call us, we are subject to special vigilance and that, with my record as a furious person who killed two people in a matter of seconds, I am rushed to my cell at the slightest sign of trouble anywhere and forced to remain there under the watchful eye of a warder. But everyone knows that, whatever be the rules, I am quiet and quite normal, keep busy with the work given to me and do it well and promptly.

Because of my studiousness, I am regarded as a scholar and the old man, the Superintendent, who has been friendly to me, complimented me on my teaching in the evening classes and showed me a letter from one of the ex-prisoners thanking me not only for the helpful lessons I gave them but for being an example of grace and good behaviour. What a compliment to be received by a life convict in jail ! It seems the young man who had been involved in a fracas and sentenced to four years, went back and privately appeared for the School-leaving certificate examination and passed. "Please convey," he wrote to the Superintendent, "to my dear teacher my gratitude and assure her that I shall be a good boy and always remember her kindness."

"Well, young lady," the Superintendent told me, "you can be happy over that. And I am glad that he wrote to me, because I can keep it in your record here and that may help you."

I am not very much excited because I am suspicious of young fellows being too sweet — this chap was eighteen or nineteen when he came. I am only

twenty-nine now and to male eyes, I suppose, I am a good 'cow'. That is what Satthi called me, isn't it? But it pleased me to know that the young fellow did pass the examination. He may be a good type too. The Superintendent now gave a better room for the evening classes and better lights. Some new books have also come and the prisoner-students are supplied more liberally with stationery, out of their earnings.

Only, the Vakil has been a riddle. He meets me regularly once a fortnight, gives me news of Shyamili. I learnt that my poor uncle died after a stroke and Ramu, the elder son in Bombay, who had eventually prospered, had taken my aunt and my other cousins there to be under his care. Lakshmi was in Madras and she has now two children, both girls. The Vakil has not seen them, but got the news from my teacher Sundaram who was still at his post seeing off batches of students from the school, year after year. He had written to Mr. Shastri to convey the news to me.

For the first time last week, with the special permission of the Superintendent, the Vakil gave me some sweets and some money saying that it was his and his wife's *Karthikai* greetings to me. I know *Karthikai* is a very important and sacred occasion when a brother assures his sister of his affection and vouches it with such presents. I had forgotten all these customs, having ceased to be a human being. Referred to by every one as a killer convict, I had begun to think of myself as some kind of an animal. Human sentiments seemed to have just disappeared and that was why the Vakil found me always silent if not sullen. I was a little surprised at this gesture, which is a very significant one, and I must say I was a little touched, however much life in jail might have changed me. The warder got it and gave it to me as we were separated by a double row of bars. I did not know what to say. I scrutinised his face for a motive — this has become my second nature — and he was also perhaps watching me. He had a soft smile and his face was lit with what I can describe as a look of longing. It is a bit funny to say that, because he is a stranger to me except

for the fact that he took a great amount of interest as a lawyer to help me in the Court. Of course, there is the fact that he was a close friend of my dear teacher Sundaram. I would also say this : it was not the look of someone — you know, a woman can sense that — with a bad mind but one with goodwill and an eagerness to be friendly. All this passed through my mind as I saw him looking at me. As I said I was affected a bit and I said “Namaskaram” in Tamil as I could only do this from inside a prison. Normally, the sister, if she is younger, kneels and puts her head to the ground seeking the brother’s blessings. He could see that I was cautious and perhaps thought I was unemotional, which, ironically, at this particular moment was not the case.

There has been a stunning development. You, who may read this, may not believe it, It was a letter about my husband.

I had not seen him after the evidence in the Court. But the Vakil had told me that my husband had waited in the Court that day outside to meet him, just as I had advised him from the dock. He told the Vakil that he wanted to be taken to teacher Sundaram. Since Mr. Shastri was then very busy on the case, he could not take him to the teacher immediately and kept him in his own house and, after the judgement had been pronounced and as I had refused to appeal, he took him to the village and entrusted him to my dear teacher.

Two days back the Vakil quietly passed on a letter to me. The hand-writing thrilled me. It was my beloved teacher’s. This is what the letter said. I am so happy, I am copying it fully.

My dear Nana,

Except that Samban has been staying on with me, I have not written to you for a long time about him. Perhaps, you also did not want to inquire, knowing that, beyond keeping him fed and clothed, there was nothing much that anyone could do for him.

The story is different. One of my colleagues told me some time ago that Samban had entered into a

violent argument with a shop man who is not very much liked in these parts, had gathered a crowd and finally made him apologise. What do you say to that ?

I hope I have done for him what poor Rangam would have done (I am sure of that) but could not, since fate willed otherwise. After the first few weeks, I found that there was nothing fundamentally wrong with him because he understood instructions and had a good memory. My job, and I made it a relaxation, whenever I had time to spare, was to keep talking to him. Any reference to Rangam delighted him and I told him how she was my pupil and one day I showed him the photograph of a group of students and teachers taken some time before she left school, that is, in the final school-leaving examination year. She was in the front row seated on the floor while we, teachers were seated on chairs. I told him she was a very bright student and everyone liked her.

I left it at that. I was watching the reaction. Two days later, when I returned from school, I found he had taken the photograph from the wall and was looking at it. He had not seen me enter the house. I went to my room, changed and called him. He quietly put the photograph back on the wall and came. I asked some routine questions, whether there had been anything in the post etc. He did not know that I had noticed what he had done.

I caught him again looking at the photograph on more than one occasion and, one day, he was sitting in the veranda and I could see that he had been weeping with the photograph on his lap. I ignored him and he did not say anything.

That was the first milestone crossed. I was overjoyed. He had begun to react and could feel and he could reason. I was convinced now that there was hope. There was something to build on.

I would tell him little stories and he became interested. I got him some good clothes and insisted on his dressing properly and took him with me when I called on friends after telling him that he should

not mind if people did not talk to him and he should also not speak unless I spoke to him. Gradually, he began to listen to conversations and later, I would talk to him and gently in stages we began to discuss what one man said and what others remarked and so on. He was able to participate in this domestic discussion between us intelligently. By this time, I had sent away a servant, who had been working for me, as he was not giving Samban proper respect and I felt Samban might slip back to his ways of diffidence. I told him that we could save some money by stopping him and do our work ourselves. Earlier, he would have said "Rangam has told me to be careful about money", but now, he didn't say that. He said "Why should you waste money when I am here. I can help."

There was a noticeable difference in the tone. He knew what he was saying. He settled to a routine and everything was spick and span in the house. Sometimes, he would do something contrary to my instructions and justify himself by saying that what I had in mind was not possible and so he had done something else necessary. I would not make much of it one way or the other, passing each incident off merely commenting, 'that is perfectly all right, Samban' or 'I am sorry I had not thought of it, Samban' or words like that. He began to tell we were equals and he had a good measure of responsibility to keep the house going.

Then, I began my story-telling sessions more purposefully. We used to enjoy jokes together and one day, when I was telling a somewhat sad story, he suddenly became silent. I asked him :

"Are you thinking of Rangam?"

He asked me in surprise how I knew. I told him I knew he loved Rangam (He had begun to call me 'Sundaranna' as an elder brother, soon after he came to my house).

"Sundaranna, may I ask you something?"

I laughed. "Are you asking my permission?"

"No, no," he said. "I have been thinking a lot

about Rangam. You know her very well, isn't it? She must have become terribly angry to have to kill those people. Probably, I did not understand then. I feel I may have prevented it and I feel very guilty."

Dear Nana, I was shocked. I was midway between joy and tears. This man, it seemed, had woken up after a long slumber. I did not want any pause in the exchange of ideas and asked him :

"What could you have done?"

"That is what I have been thinking. I have been trying to remember what happened on that day. Tell me if I go wrong."

"Those two people — they were the cause. Right? what did they do? What did they do? (he repeated). They said they were friends. In those days I was blind. I thought all were my friends. I wanted friends. I wanted to be friends with everybody. You know I had been alone day and night — no friends, no one to talk to....." (I felt he was going off the track — perhaps recalling some past experience, some old memory. I did not want to interrupt. I let him go on).

"..... I could'nt cry. I couldn't talk. There was no one around in that cattleshed. They said 'I must eat straw.' They said I was an idiot. They jeered. They laughed. They danced around me. O, please let me go, let me go.....No, no, you are a calf. Walk on four legs. O let me go.....please.....we are your friends — eat straw like cattle o,o,o, spare me. Let me out...No, idiot, you be there. Don't beat me, please, please...Oh my head is splitting. I have been hurt on the head....."

And poor Samban fainted.

If it were America or Britain or Germany or some rich, advanced country, he would have been taken to a psychiatrist and he could have diagnosed his trouble scientifically. I am not a psychiatrist but a simple teacher and I did not know what to do or say, how to put the right question. I brought some water and gently wetted his face. He woke up and noticed that he was lying down.

"I am sorry, Sundaranna," he said. "I think I went to sleep suddenly."

"No, you fainted," I said.

"Did I? Why? Did I say anything? I had a dream I think. I thought I was being teased by some wild boys. It seemed real. Did I say something? I think I was caught by some people, a large number of people — boys I think — and then I ran into a cattleshed and was beaten and left there. I thought I had been locked out of the house. I don't know what happened thereafter. Did I say some thing? Please tell me. Perhaps it was not a dream. I don't know why. My heart is so heavy. I feel sorry, grieved over something."

"Don't feel that way, Samban. When old memories fade, they are also like dreams and, sometimes, dreams appear so real that they look like memories. You know, sometimes I have also felt intensely about dreams and fanciful thoughts — sometimes happy, sometimes sad. Then I always collect myself and force myself to realize that we have to go by what we see and what we have to do. Actually, you remember we were talking about Rangam."

"Yes, yes. I remember now. I was saying I could have prevented it. Yes, we were talking about what happened on that day. Something offended, something, I must say, angered, seriously angered her and Rangam felt insulted. I think I was the person insulted, but I didn't know it, but Rangam knew it, being clever as you know very well yourself."

I remained silent.

"It was the saree, I think. Who were they to bring a saree for my wife? I should have asked them, 'You swine, who are you to give this to my wife?'" The irony of it was I knew. Rangam had told me we should get nothing free from anyone. But I forgot. In those days, I feel, I used to forget. Our Narayananna (that is you, Nana) asked me and even then I did not know. Rangam must have heard from inside. She was always watching me, as you said the other day in that story — like a bird watching its

young. Am I right?"

I nodded.

"Her anger must have risen then. And what else was it? Yes, their asking for Shyamali? The pity of it is, I knew. Rangam had told me that we should not seek help from others for what we can and should do ourselves. But then, I forgot again. She must have seen they were making fun of me. I did not know, but she knew. She was angry on my behalf. Oh, the tragedy of it. I should have driven them out then. But I was blind. I thought they were right.

"One more thing. Narayananna asked me about it, I remember — that song. The whole of last night I was awake thinking about it. What a fool I was — to have sung that song in the open Court. That fool policeman did not know. It was Narayananna who asked me to sing it — not to shame me, I know now, but show how that song was an insult to me and that was why Rangam got angry.

"Sundaranna, you have not said anything. I have been talking so much. Am I wrong?"

"No, Samban," I said. "I have also been wondering. The Judge asked me also — you were not present and I told him the same thing. Rangam was angered and she felt insulted and she lost control over herself."

"Yes, Sundaranna, I feel terribly guilty. I sent Rangam to jail — not Satthi, not the Judge but I, I — Oh, Oh, tell me what can I do?" Samban covered his face with both hands weeping and moved his face from side to side.

"Samban, you know, if I write what you have told me, to Rangam, she will be very happy and proud of you. Everything you have said is perfectly correct, but don't regret. It serves no purpose. You are not a young boy any more and have no time to waste. Let us think of what we should do."

Can you imagine that such an incredible transformation can take place? The poor man had evidently been forced to live like a cave man by some wicked people, with no opportunity to think and speak for himself. I am convinced that there was some

terrible trouble in his early boyhood when, as an orphan, he was punished and humiliated by those among whom he had lived, and lost his wits. For the last few months, he has been breathing fresh air as it were — we were both talking and working as equals and he had slowly come out of the cave. Every time, he has been taking me by surprise and his analysis of the events on that tragic day was clear, with the right emphasis on every point. The only thing he missed, and about which I did not want to remind him was her change of attitude after the murder, her wearing the kumkumum and the namaskaram. That remains a mystery. I thought I would confuse him if I referred to the point.

Let me conclude the story. For three years, he has been quietly learning. At his age — he is past thirty — it is a very delicate and sensitive task to teach him but he is reading books, learning mathematics, going out, meeting people and doing the shopping — so much changed that, as I told you, he has made such a row with that fraudulent shop-keeper that the man had to eat humble pie.

That, Nana, is Samban's story. He is waiting for the day when he can present himself to Rangam — God knows what he has in mind. His admiration and adoration of her is now tinged by his intense regret that he had been of no help to her and his hope that he may still vindicate himself. That girl deserves it all of course, and, one in a million — Nana, it breaks my heart to think that she is locked up in jail."

When I hugged that letter, I hugged two people — the man who is my husband, the father of my child to whom I owe my love and faith, and then the man I love, as my lost love. How wise, how considerate, how gracious !

After reading that letter again and again, I longed to see my husband. How did he look now ? He used to have a bewildered look always and hang on to my lips to guide him. I knew he would improve, as physically he was all right and he listened to what I said and clung to my instructions. Apparently, he

had some shock in his very young years and having no one to help him, he became a butt of everyone, lost his nerve and remained untutored, listless, without initiative and will. My wise teacher, for my sake, must have located his weakness and made him get over it. The letter convinced me that my husband had regained confidence and understanding — the two qualities which make up manhood.

The Vakil did not ask me to return that letter. He knew I was excited, very much moved, but I was quick to return to my reserve, for, counting out other things, I was not able to fix my focus on this man? Why this interest, why this kindness, why this — love?

There was no change in his attitude of unaffected friendliness. With the next consignment of books, there was a note: "We (who is 'we?') would like to know whether you have been making good use of the books we have been sending regularly. Enclosed are a set of examination papers. If you can answer them, it may be of help." (To whom?)

That was all. Something was happening to me. I was getting on to thirty, but there is a child in me somewhere, as I am full of curiosity and any exercise connected with knowledge and study excites me. I tend to forget sometimes that I am a murderer — two killings — serving a life-term, that I was raped and became a "bad woman". All that I was forgetting with my life-giving activities like doing some domestic work in the jail, then teaching and finally learning.

I knew Narayana Shastri, my Vakil, had something to do with these things and also perhaps my beloved teacher, Sundaram, who wants me to learn. He is the only man whose heart beats in accord with mine — on knowledge, on the instinct to want to know, to learn, — science, literature, history, everything, anything. He was the school librarian also and he managed to get all new books and we used to share the joy of handling them. I love the smell of new books and one day I found he had also the same weakness.

These two people have been helping me, but I

am still suspicious about the Vakil. He may be a good man for all I know, or do not know, but look at the way he chases me. Unless a man is after a woman, he does not do that. Am I right, I wonder. Who authorised him to be my lawyer and how was he interested, unless he also wanted what the others want from a wanton woman? Am I not a wanton woman? A woman who was raped becomes a bad woman. The man can go round with a feather in his ego cap — he had ‘bagged’ a woman. Perhaps, that is what they may be saying to themselves, those things of the lechery street.

Or am I committing a sin with bad thoughts about the man who has been helping me, who meets me without fail once a fortnight, as the law allows, gave me a karthikai gift vouching me as a sister — and looking at me, Lord, with such love, I should be inhuman if I don’t acknowledge it. But I cannot get away from that rape, from the predatory male. I cannot see anybody looking at me without feeling it is my body they want, all, all, all, I tell you, again and again and again. Forgive me, Narayana Shastri.

I did not want all that defence you put up, so ably. I was amused, I was interested. I watched you with admiration. You might as well have let me hang instead of tearing that concocted confession into pieces, perspiration flowing from the faces of those policemen. That judge was gloating. He would look at me now and then, and, it seemed, both of us were enjoying the situation. But that man was a judicial purist. Narayana Shastri hinted at various possibilities and loopholes to get me out — extreme provocation and mortification a woman could not bear, temporary insanity etc. I knew that the judge was very sympathetic. I did not know what impelled him finally to pronounce this sentence — rigorous imprisonment for life. Perhaps, I suspect, he thought — a very shrewd man, I would say — I would be mentally under a cloud of my own if I did not pay the price for what I had done. I would say a hundred times, that he was right. It was that Narayana Shastri

harping on my kumkumum and the namaskaram to my husband (to which my beloved teacher had guided the vakil) interpreting it as a kind of self-absolvment which he did most brilliantly. It was that, I think, which gave a clue to the judge about my mind — that 'crucify thy flesh for thy sin' doctrine. So many lines of logic must have converged. The letter and spirit of the law, which called for hanging, then my own urge to take the punishment, not regret but equity, moral grounds and then sympathy. He gave me a life-term but decided to save my neck. He looked up to see my face after the judgement. He must have noted my quiet acceptance. And, as I saw him, I felt I had not seen a more understanding man. Everyone except him got up to go. But he didn't. He sat on for several minutes and then slowly got up and left the Court.

The Vakil wanted me to go on appeal, but I told him in a few chilly words that I would fast unto death if he did. He didn't. Now, he meets me every fortnight — waiting for the day I would be free !

Chapter 7

When the Court assembled the next morning, the Inspector was in high spirits. The police had apparently discussed all possible questions. The Prosecution Officer's grandiose attitude seemed to amuse the Judge.

Judge : Would the Defence continue the cross-examination ?

I. Yes, Your Honour.

(Turning to the Inspector in the witness box) Inspector, you were able by talking to persuade the accused to speak out and she did. Is that right ?

W. Yes, that is right.

I. Good, did she speak reluctantly or freely ?

W. Quite freely and voluntarily.

I. Voluntarily ? Must be so after your persuasive talking. Did she mumble or talk aloud ?

W. She talked quite loudly and clearly.

I. So she was not nervous and confused.

W. I have already told you.

I. Yes, you have said — but in two contradictory answers — once as nervous and confused and the other time as defiant and forthright. Can you kindly guide the Court which should be taken as the correct version ?

Prosec. This is simple quibbling double-talk and heckling. I seek the Court's protection to ensure that the defence lawyer does not heckle the witness.

Judge : I am inclined to advise the Prosecution to follow the cross-examination more closely. The witness first said that the accused, at the time the police questioned her, was nervous and confused which was the reason why a cogent confession was drafted by the police to help the accused. Then the witness said that the accused was defiant and forthright. Just now the witness said the accused spoke loudly and clearly. I am afraid the Defence lawyer is entitled to a clarification. (Turning to me) Please put the question again.

I. Inspector, what is your actual statement ? Was the accused nervous and confused or defiant and forthright ?

W. Nervous and confused.

I. Now you have become consistent. So, you had to sift carefully the facts and link them into a cogent statement. Is that right ?

W. Yes, that is correct.

I. So, for your case, you go by the confession ?

W. Yes, I do.

I. Were her statements long or short ?

W. They were full statements.

I. Despite being nervous and confused. But my question was were the statements long or short.

W. Some were long and some were short.

I. Can you give some examples ?

W. She described how she became angry at great length and described how she hit them briefly.

I. She had got into a fury, is that what you mean when you say she described at great length how she became angry. You need not describe. You can give a brief answer.

W. Yes, she had worked herself up into a fury. She said that.

I. You noted that ?

W. Naturally.

I. Fine. Then how does the confession say that she had carefully planned the attack and had asked them to come home to be killed. May I read the words of the confession to refresh your memory ?

W. My memory is very clear. Those were the words of the confession.

I. But you have just now deposed that she said she had worked herself up into a fury. You have also said you prepared the draft confession to help the accused and you have put in the draft the statement that she had carefully planned the attack. The Court may suspect that you are more nervous and confused than the accused.

Prosec. I must submit that the Court is allowing the Defence to put misleading questions to the witness.

Judge. I am afraid that the Prosecution has to refresh its memory about the rules of cross-examination. The witness is an Inspector of Police, not a layman, unfamiliar with law and judicial proceedings. He should know his facts. The witness will answer the question.

W. She worked herself up into a fury.

I. Inspector, this is a very serious murder case where two people have been killed. Would you tell the Court whether you are depending on the confession to seek a judgement or you conducted independent investigations?

W. It is elementary knowledge that police conduct extensive investigations whether the case be a serious one or not a serious one.

I. I don't want to know first principles. I want a straight answer to my question. Did you conduct independent investigations?

W. Yes, we did.

I. At the scene of the crime?

W. Yes.

I. In the village?

W. Yes.

I. Did you find out the state of mind of the accused in recent weeks from any of the villagers? Did you question any of them?

W. We questioned many but the state of mind of the accused could not be ascertained as the accused had not been moving about for several weeks prior to the incident and confined herself to her house.

I. She must have been helping her husband in their hotel.

W. The hotel had been closed more than three months previously.

I. So, the state of mind of the accused was not known to support the view that she had worked herself up into a fury, as you have just said.

W. No, yes, yes.

I. Yes or No?

W. Yes.

I. But then the confession drafted by you says she had not worked herself up into a fury and she

had deliberately invited the victims to her house. We seem to be back in square one.

Prosec. I think —

Judge. Check your mind before you think. Defence will please proceed.

I. Let that be. You deposed now you carried extensive investigations. Do you stand by that statement?

W. Of course.

I. Good. The confession drafted by you says that the accused met the victims and invited them to her house to be killed, suggesting a deliberate killing. You have just now deposed that you had found out by extensive investigation that the accused had never left her house for several weeks. Which is correct?

The witness was sweating profusely. The Prosecution Counsel looked at the judge pathetically.

I. I put it to you that your alleged confession by the accused is a worthless piece of paper. The case against the accused has been cooked up with unseemly haste and in an immature fashion. Would you agree that you are not sure after your suppose-to-be investigations and, after the alleged confession, whether the killing was deliberately planned or a result of momentary fury.

Please reply Yes or No.

W. No.

I. Meaning?

W. According to the confession it was deliberate and according to our investigations, it was due to momentary hurry.

I. What is your conclusion? Do you go by the confession or your investigations?

W. Our investigations.

I. So you reject the confession?

W. I do.

I. A few minutes ago, you said you went by the confession. The Court will draw its own conclusions.

I looked at Rangam. Her mood seemed to be the same as that of the spectators who seemed thrilled at the discomfiture of the police. As Rangam was

taken away, she saw lawyers crowding around me and congratulating me. I had never been more elated. The Prosecution had been routed.

The rest of the case went on like a lame-duck affair. The Prosecution was not able to present a proper motive on the circumstances under which the killing had taken place. Their witnesses proved to be of absolutely no use to them. After my cross-examination of the Inspector, the Prosecution tried to avoid all cross-examination and their later submissions were all about the particulars of the killing, the murder weapon, the nature of the injuries etc. I had no interest in them.

I had no doubt now that Rangam would not be hanged. Extreme provocation and insult to the honour of a woman and criminal motivation against a respectable housewife had been proved. I had now to convince the judge about the honourable character and background of Rangam. For this I decided I would rely on Rangam's friendly teachers and also my dear friend Sundaram.

Their testimony was unanimously in favour of Rangam based on her school records.

When Sundaram took the witness box, both he and Rangam did not look at each other. After several minutes, he turned and she smiled and saluted him with folded hands. The Judge had ordered her handcuffs to be removed rejecting the Prosecution's requests and injunctions. Sundaram did not smile back but his face was wreathed in agony. I began my questions :

I. Would you kindly tell the Court, Mr. Sundaram, how long you have known the accused ?

S. I have known her for some ten years and during the last three years of her life in the School, I worked as her teacher. She was my student.

I. She was a good student ?

S. The brightest in the School.

I. She comes from a prosperous family, I suppose.

S. On the contrary, she comes from a very poor family.

I. Can you give some particulars in support of this deposition ?

S. She was an orphan, her parents having died when she was a child of five or so. She was brought up by her uncle, her mother's brother, with a large family of his own, who was a village primary school teacher.

I. Then how was she able to pursue her education.

S. She was given exemption from fees on account of her condition and she was able to win scholarships and prizes every year, which incidentally, helped her uncle's family budget.

I. The scholarships were presumably given on account of her domestic situation.

S. No. They were merit scholarships. She was naturally brilliant. I have rarely, in fact, never in my twenty years of service as a teacher, come across a student of this calibre.

I. Did you find her conduct as good as her aptitude for study ?

S. Exemplary. She was loved by all her teachers. Her name is on the School's Honour Board, with a note, "Special prize for good conduct" — which appears against no other name.

I. You knew when she got married.

S. Yes, I attended the marriage.

I. At what age was she married ?

S. At twelve, if I remember correct.

I. She could not have completed her education in the School at that age.

S. No, after her marriage she was in the School for a little over two years and passed the School-Leaving examination and came out First in the school as expected.

I. I am anxious to establish, for the understanding of the Court, why her teachers showed her special sympathy.

S. She has a naturally friendly temperament. She helped weaker students and was never known to grumble despite very depressing conditions at home. She was in demand for all special college functions

because of her ability to sing and dance. She was also in the school athletic team. An all-rounder, she was loved by all.

I. You have not made any mention of your own special knowledge.

S. Well, it is a little difficult to be frank, but I would like the Court to know. This girl was forced to marry a young man who could not but be described as a retarded person. He was uneducated, unemployed and incapable of earning his livelihood. When the news reached us in the School, we were all against it. I tried to persuade her not to accept the marriage. Then she told me words which were very wise for a girl of twelve. She said that she had to show her gratitude to her poor uncle who had brought her up and he was desperately anxious to get her married. She said she would take her chance with the young man rather than hurt her poor uncle.

I. Thank you Mr. Sundaram.

The Judge remained silent for several minutes looking occasionally at Rangam.

Then followed the usual procedure of the Prosecution summing up the case and the Defence reply was gone through. The Prosecution harped on the point that here were two people killed in a most inhuman fashion, smashed to death with a crowbar. The accused at no time had denied her guilt. The defence lawyer had made desperate efforts to find fault with the police, but all this legal jugglery could not hide the simple fact that the accused had heinously killed two people who had never made any gesture of violence against her. The crime simply called for the highest penalty for murder laid down by the law.

I argued that it was not for nothing that the law-makers in our country had made a very large number of provisions to ensure that the character of a crime must be clearly determined before punishment was given. In this case, the Prosecution had failed to throw any light on the motivations which had to be duly taken into account in judging the character of the crime.

"The Court has to determine," I argued, "whether, when it is established that a grossly malicious attempt is made to kidnap her child in order to force her to yield to blackmail, a respectable housewife living honourably with her husband has the right to defend her honour or not." Further, what was the immediate provocation? The husband, who was an acknowledged simpleton, was being led to speak about his private life with his wife. One could only speculate what might have happened if the insulted housewife had resorted to weaker means of defence. Here was she alone against two men with criminal and, I might say, debaucherous intentions, her husband being incapable of any kind of initiative. All this had been established during the trial. "The law is totally clear on the right of a helpless woman who is pushed against the wall and is facing humiliation and dishonour to defend herself to the utmost of her strength and ability. The letter and spirit of the law requires full protection to the woman in such circumstances. The accused has an absolute right for acquittal."

There was pindrop silence in the Court when I finished. For me personally it was a highly emotional moment. At times, it was difficult for me to speak and I had to pause to collect myself. It was obvious I had produced a tremendous impression. For me, the question was my sister's life. For the others, the stake was the right of self-defence of a woman threatened with dishonour.

The Prosecutor himself was so stunned by my arguments that he merely said that the evidence about the murder was before the Court and justice could not be assessed in terms of emotion.

The Judge announced that he would pronounce his judgement the next morning. He gave instructions that the greatest care must be taken of the accused in view of the grave charges against her.

Later, he called me to his Chamber and told me that he was anxious that she should not attempt suicide. "Can you ensure that?" he asked me.

"I am helpless, sir," I told him. "She does not

listen to me. I don't know what she will or will not do."

"I shall then send special instructions to the jail authorities," he said.

The Judgement which came the next day was unusually brief. Rangam stood in the dock in handcuffs. The judge noticed that, but unlike earlier during the trial, he did not order that they should be removed.

After a narration of the circumstances of the crime, he pointed out that there was no doubt left from the evidence that the accused struck to kill. To that extent, there was no mitigation in the perpetration of the crime. But it was also clear that the accused acted on the spur of the moment and under extreme provocation. Neither the Prosecution nor the defence had been able to bring out the actual motive behind the crime. The immediate provocation was of course offensive, repulsive and, as brought out by the able defence counsel, insulting for any woman to tolerate. In my opinion, this alone is not an adequate motive for such determined action. I am inclined to suspect that there must have been a deliberate motive. The doubt on this point does not, however, go to the advantage of the accused. The accused, though young, is highly intelligent, knowledgeable and confident and should have been able to clear the point. In the absence of definite extenuating factors in regard to the motive emerging out of the evidence, the accent falls on the deliberate intention to kill and I cannot but come to the conclusion that the crime was committed deliberately but under severe provocation. I, therefore, pass by the extreme penalty provided by the law and sentence the accused to rigorous imprisonment for life."

"Considering the background of the accused," he continued, "and the excellent testimony about her character and talents given by witnesses, who are in a position to speak with authority about the accused, I feel that hopes of her rehabilitation might be justified and I wish to underline this fact so that the prisoner might be given such facilities as the law may allow in

this direction during the period of her incarceration.”

Rangam was looking at the judge without the least perturbation while he continued to sit for several minutes. I thought there was a slight gesture of grateful acceptance when she bowed gracefully. She looked at me as if to say ‘thank you’ and passed her eyes over the ranks of spectators and when she spotted Sundaram, she smiled at him. Then she was led away. The judge was looking at her till she left and then slowly got up and left the Court.

Chapter 8

I have passed the B.A. examination of the Madras University. Take it from me, it is so, though you will not find my name in the University records.

The Jail Superintendent called me one day and gave me some bulky envelopes saying :

“This is the first time in the history of the various jails where I have worked that there have been two university examinations of the type you have written. I think it is a unique privilege both for me in charge of the jail and for you as a prisoner serving a life-term. I can guess the contents of these packets since a friend has conveyed the news to me. He told me that it was best if you knew about it yourself from these packets. So here you are — some good news.”

You may remember that when I was in the fourth year, I have already said, I started what proved before long to be my writing lessons. These were sent back to me “approved” and sometimes with some complimentary remarks like “good”. I began to be interested and forgot my nightmares and I suppose you might say I was becoming soft again. I began to look with pity whenever any new prisoners came in especially those who came after fights, and would wonder to myself what caused these fights, whether these were due to “unmentionable” circumstances like mine of one kind and another. But I was never the gossip type and moreover, my hands were full, morning and evening. I had been given four “colleagues” to help me in the room-cleaning work and I had been discreetly told that I had merely to do the supervision. But I made it a point to make it a team work and joined them, working with them side by side, so that there could not be any sense of superiority or inferiority and, in any case, as a criminal lifer, I had to bear the big chunk.

But the colleagues did help to reduce the time taken and as soon as I was free, I hurried up with the laundry accounts and well before noon, I was with

my books, reading and writing. My fortnightly visitor never failed to appear and he would tell me about Shyamali and then ask me whether I wanted any books in particular.

Indeed, I was becoming human. My heart began to ache for Shyamali. She must have become eight, the sweetest age for a girl. She has my husband's features quite a bit and my features too, but she takes after me temperamentally. She was not a cry baby and got on well with all, not shy but not boisterous too or noisy as children at three and four are. The image I have of her was as she was when I was taken away. She had not seen criminals and prisoners and when the police clamped the handcuffs on me, she was stunned and became pale with fright. I thought she would faint. She had been sitting on my lap till then and, in fact, I was telling her not to be afraid but be cheerful. I knew I would be taken away but I could not tell that to her. I told her what my father used to tell me when I was a little kid, never to cry or be sullen but keep smiling and friendly. 'No one would like or be kind to a cry-baby' I told her. "Will you remember that, Chomu?" I told her and kissed her and as tears began collecting in my eyes, I kissed her and hid my face.

Well, life is like that for a woman who was raped and became a bad woman in the eyes of the world, became dehumanised as it were, and became a killer when she saw the man who had done it to her and was further, planning to stab her in the heart by attempting to abduct her child. That was a good thing I did in the eyes of God. That picture keeps my heart burning with the embers of that horrible moment, even though layers and layers of events and impressions tend to create a crust and only now and then as now — that memory comes back in a flash. They come together, you know — a happy moment and then you see at the back of it, the inferno.

The Vakil is in the neutral area. He is my clock which keeps ticking, rain or shine, good moments or

bad. He is also fatigued, I think, quite a lot. Nowadays he never comes empty handed. Anything eatable is prohibited as prisoners might get themselves poisoned, but the books and magazines he brings keep me reminded that there is still a world beyond these bars and the high wall and the grim warders and the policemen and my dishonourable colleagues each with his or her grouses, anger, protest and guilt, giving them a composite look of coarseness and ugliness, even a laugh sounding like a hyaena's cry. That is where you live, you know, when you become a lifer after killing two people.

I have two women colleagues who have been clinging to me — I always think of them as "colleagues" because we are in the same profession, serving prison terms, and I feel sometimes they are wasting my time which is valuable for me. One of them attempted to poison her husband and nearly killed him. She is a weak, frail thing and comes from a low caste, a Telugu emigrant who speaks Tamil with a quaint accent. She told me she had had enough of seeing her husband making love to some other woman in the same room — she didn't know where he managed to find his recruits for the night — and like me, has no regrets. Her only regret is that he survived since he might be back some day to "skin me alive" — his perpetual kindly phrase for his wedded wife. In the hospital they discovered he had been poisoned and she was arrested and tortured till she confessed. They found out where she had learnt about the poison, where she had got it from and how she administered it. She was given six years — she might have got off with a light sentence but, at one stage, during the trial, she had become hysterical when she saw her husband in Court and began to shout she would do it again and again till that Satan was safely dead and cremated. I used to think how God who created kindness, love and so on, could also create cruelty and hate.

The other woman's case was even more tragic. God would not let her die ! Tortured by her husband and mother-in-law she pushed her only child into a

well and jumped after her. She should have spared the child and jumped — nobody would have known. The child began to cry when she dragged her and she had to do everything in a hurry. And in a hurry, they pulled her out. The child was dead and she was unconscious for a few hours and came back to life to find her place beside me here as another of His Majesty's guests — five years for culpable homicide not amounting to murder and attempted suicide. It is not easy to die as people imagine. Don't I know that? I was sure I would be hanged but that clever lawyer got me out. My beautiful eyes and my beautiful breasts as that policeman said and the rest of me, I suppose, rouse the devil in people. When a man smiles, pinch yourself just to remember that he is at it. From Adam right down to Satthi, I tell you, at the root it is the middle they have an eye on. You will know that only when you see your soul flying out of your body. I know that to my cost. If I had been hanged, I might have flown away with it. Now, I feel like someone who has lost her soul.

I can't get away from it but I try all the time. And so, back to the Vakil, this kindly man with his kindly face and news of Shyamali and Sheela. How does Sheela look? Is she like Shyamali? Shyamali is getting on to eight. My heart aches. That is why I said I was becoming soft. Keep away from me, you God. I don't trust you.

I was speaking about how I got into the examination and drifted away into the wilderness in this narration. I think it was all the work of this Vakil and my dear teacher. It seems, starting from the Judge's remarks — I learn he has now become a senior District Judge — about my rehabilitation being helped, they presented my school record signed by the teachers of my School to the highest jail authorities and also a testimony on my "good nature" signed by every blessed man in that village including the over-cautious headman — well, they sought permission for books and papers from friends and well-wishers to be supplied to me in jail. The relevant portion from the judge-

ment was quoted to show that the judge's pronouncement was deliberate and was a corollary to the course of justice. You know, to every department of the government what an I.C.S. officer says is something like a directive not to be ignored and my Judge was an I.C.S. officer. So, although after some delay, the authorities agreed and I became an "authorised student" in the Madura jail — the first time ever such a status was conferred on a prisoner. Of course, I might not have known about all this but for that kindly Jail Superintendent who gave me the entire picture in the course of our conversation on different occasions.

So I began with books and the requisite stationary as if I was studying in a college. I was instructed to write essays and answer question papers. There was no relaxation, however, so far as my assigned duties in jail were concerned, but I had no idle time like the others and that was welcome to me. The Vakil would come as usual regularly and ask me if I wanted anything in particular and I would answer him. We were on speaking terms now, as you might call it, though I had little to tell him. He would always speak about Shyamali and Sheela as if they were twins. Any reference to Shyamali brought a chain of sad thoughts to me from which I could not free myself for a long time thereafter and, as days went by, I was always thinking of her. How could I ever thank Narayana Shastri for looking after her and, from the manner in which he referred to her, it seemed, he did not make any difference between Shyamali and his own daughter. "How is my dear child? Has she grown?" These questions were coming to my mind all the time. And then a big question: "What after I get out of here? Should I identify myself to her? What if she knows her mother has been in jail for murder? Why does the Vakil remind me of her? Why do I remember? Why can't I be left alone to live without thoughts, memories, emotions?"

When a person, and that a woman, in jail lives with a history such as mine, one would go mad. But that was not possible for me. For here, these people,

this Vakil, no doubt helped, advised and guided by my teacher, Sundaram, are trying to make life worth while for me. In such a situation, the easiest course any one could take was to drift. So, my education was some kind of a drift.

I have always been interested in studies and books and there was no subject which did not interest me. But what I seemed to be undergoing seemed to be a regular course, text-books according to a set syllabus, questions, answers, essays and what else? Everything one would perhaps learn in a college, though I do not know what they teach in a college. There were set time-limits, all written down, mind you. It was not in my teacher's hand, or in the Vakil's, with which I was familiar, but some one who gave detailed instructions. There were four or five subjects, mainly English, History (Indian and European) and then Economics and Sanskrit. There were separate note books and text books and what were called books for extra reading. What a discipline! It was as if there was an invisible teacher present in the jail, putting me to the job of learning.

It should have looked funny in that atmosphere — it was all gloom, anger and protest. What else can you expect in jail where prisoners come with their past petrified in their hearts and a future arid and awesome with uncertainties. Here was I getting on to thirty, sitting in this atmosphere, with nothing called hope or ambition or love or faith labouring with books and papers at my desk. Days and weeks and months went by. "These lines are to be learnt by heart". "This chapter to be summarised" "Compare with —" Note the time taken for this essay" and so on and so forth, instructions would come and I would faithfully comply. All this seemed to be an independent arrangement. The Vakil would come and go, but, for these exchanges of books, questions and answers, there was some peon who would come quite often, some times on alternate days and hand them over to the Jail Superintendent, who will have them sent on to me through some warder.

Three years or four, this way. I was staggered sometimes by the big books I was getting before me. Marshall's Economics, Harold Laski, Shakespeare's plays, an exciting book with the title "Shakespeare's mind and art" by Dowden. I was thrilled. Then there were the novels, Scott, Dickens and Meredith, continental classics like Anna Karenina, Les Miserables, The Hunchback of Notre Dame and some books of Thomas Hardy ("Far from the Madding Crowd" with my name written on it — Srimati Ranganayaki, and the note pinned on : "This must be read as a text book". It was all a regular course, like some school or college — only I had strange "hostel mates" — murderers, thieves and burglars. But they were all full of regard for me and nobody ever reminded me or even thought that I was there because I had killed two people. I was becoming soft and old memories were becoming old memories, blurred, the heat gone, the violence and the fury and the despair making your head heavy and pounding your heart no more real.

And, finally, two events crowned this era of drift with knowledge, recompense and hope. I remembered : "Hope springs eternal in the human breast". Indeed, I was full of unuttered words, "Like beauty on a monument" "To be or not to be", "Earth has nothing to show more fair", "Grinning honour", "Peace hath its victories" — Lord, knowledge ! There was a new world of the mind opening for me, enough to forget the reality around me, enough to forget my poor colleagues, who were groaning, some with regrets, some with unrealized revenge. "I should have killed him, he should have died," — that woman who attempted to poison her husband would say sitting alone in the night while everyone else would be sleeping — "Another woman within three feet of me without a stitch on her ! One word of protest from me — it would be blows and blows and kicks. He would hold me by my hair and knock my head against the wall and I would shriek and no one would interfere beyond making sympathetic comments. Can you listen to that, not once but many times when it is all dark and

silent except for some cling clang of barred doors opening and closing I had all sympathy for that woman. A long death, not a long life.

The Jail Superintendent called me one day and gave me three or four big parcels. Yes, I have mentioned that already. He was an old man and we had been together for eight years. He lived in a bungalow nearby and I was called there one day to help his wife in some domestic work. This is not done. Lifers are not allowed out that way, but the Superintendent (who lived in the Jail compound itself) had the discretion and prisoners did all kinds of work there — including maintaining a tennis Court! I could see that he deliberately wanted to give me an airing and a little freedom, though I knew he was watching me, whether I was a woman with any aberration.

I was amazed to see the parcels. That was where I began, isn't it? The Superintendent watched me open them, one by one. They were my so-called Answer Papers with marks. They were pinned on to printed question papers (whose hand-written transcripts I had received earlier and answered) — Intermediate Examination, Madras University — Part I etc. And the mark 54/100, 72/100 and so on. And finally, "Passed in II Class, with distinction in two subjects".

Only then did I realize that the answers I had been writing were (Remember the note? "To be answered in three hours without reference to any book) for actual university questions. Then came the B.A. question papers and answers. I had passed the B.A. examination also in Second Class, over all percentage 59/100, missing a First by one mark!

Incredible! But there you are. That is a fact, though the questions I answered were those for the University examinations held a few weeks earlier, but I had no knowledge of them. Killer-prisoner and the rest of it, but I am a university graduate, that is to say, I would have been if I had been allowed to write in the public examination. But I was a lifer and

could not be taken out except in handcuffs. It was thus I became a graduate. In prison, how else can one become a university graduate ?

The mystery of the "invisible tuition" — I don't know what else to call it — was also solved before long, thanks again to the Jail Superintendent. He had all my old books and notes returned, except some of my own notes which I was allowed to keep. The table and chair were also taken away. "We have helped you, I think, as best as we can, as directed by the Judge who tried your case. Now, during the time you are here, you will help other prisoners who can be rehabilitated."

"And, Rangam" he said in a reflective mood, "I shall be retiring in a few months. You do not know, but I know that the special privileges given to you have created some enemies for you — among the long-term prisoners here. I am accused of partiality. This is to some extent justified. I stretched the law to the limit to help you because my younger brother is your lawyer's colleague and very dear friend. He told me all about your story. It was they who arranged a university Assistant Professor to take care of your higher education. I think the lawyer paid him.

"I hope you will be out of here in another three years. You have been here now for eight years. I think, for your conduct, you get a reprieve of three years or so. So instead of fourteen years which is the normal term for life imprisonment, you will be released after eleven years. I am telling you this because I understand that the man who will succeed me is not my type. He was once a police officer with a bad reputation and instead of being sent out of the service, he was shifted (on some high level influence, I suspect) to jails. I had the misfortune to have him as a subordinate and I had to discipline him firmly on a few occasions. He may not, therefore, take kindly to you who, as everyone here will tell him, was helped by me. So, lie low and get out of here and I hope life will treat you kindly."

That was the last kind talk I heard in my prison life.

Chapter 9

The dawn had hardly broken when a man came rushing to my house by cycle and wanted me immediately to go to the jail. It was Vadivelu, one of the jail peons to whom I used to give little tips as he would take my card to the Superintendent whenever I went to see Rangam.

"You come and see, sir, something has happened," he said and before I could utter a word, he had mounted his cycle and gone away.

I was terribly worried and frightened. It must have something to do with Rangam, otherwise this man would not come to me. I had purchased a car by this time. I dressed up hurriedly and drove to the jail.

I could see a lot of tension and prisoners in groups were talking. I found my way to the Superintendent's room without waiting and the old man was sitting there wearing only his veshti and shirt, having been woken up in the night. When he saw me, he spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness with great grief on his face.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Rangam is in terrible trouble again," he said.

He called his Assistant who had been on duty in the night and asked him to narrate what happened.

"Round about 2 a.m. or so," the young officer said, "I heard some screaming and the prisoners in their cells began to talk noisily. I was not sleeping and rushed in. The trouble, I found, was in the cell where Rangam was confined. There were two other women there and they were in a state of terror. Rangam was calm and was standing near them and trying to pacify them. There was a man's body on the floor and he was half-naked. There were no lights in the rooms, but there were lights in the corridors, enough to see and identify people.

"I questioned Rangam who was the only person

in the room who was in a position to talk. She said I should call the police and she would have to make her statement to them. "So, let us wait," she said calmly.

"One of the women then said — she was hardly able to speak — that the man had come into the cell a little while earlier, creeping silently when they were fast asleep. He had apparently recognised Rangam and moved towards her. Something disturbed her, probably his foot had touched her or something and she sprang up at once. He went and caught hold of her hair and she was panting and gasping. Although he was not a big fellow, he was a man and, for a moment, Rangam looked helpless. She bit into his upper arm and he could not stand the pain and kicked her. But being too near, it had no force and he had to leave her hair and try to catch her hands. As soon as Rangam got the slip, she ran looking here and there and he muttered. 'Where can you go, let me see. Make any noise and I will strangle you.'"

"But Rangam spotted something lying in a corner, near the door. We could not see what it was. Only when she began hitting, we noticed it was a thick chain attached to a shackle which apparently some careless warder had dropped there. She had dashed back to near the door and her first blow fell straight on his head. He reeled and swerved towards a wall and then Rangam hit again on his head and face. Then he fell and she hit once or twice more. We think he is dead.'

"Rangam waited with the chain in hand and when he didn't move, she dropped it and told us not to be afraid. 'Thank God, he didn't come to you. You would have yielded and the devil would have had his way.'"

"That is what that woman said panting and stuttering. I didn't know what to do. I looked at the man, he did not move. He was half-nude and I put his veshti to cover his middle. Then I told Rangam I was sorry but she would have to move into a solitary cell and be there, till the police came. She accompanied me and two other warders and we locked the cell.

"Then I sent word to the Chief and within ten minutes he was here. We are now waiting for the police. This man will have to be rushed to a hospital cell and be there, till the police came.

"Who is this man?" I asked. "Has he been here long?"

"Ah, that is another thing," the Assistant Superintendent said. "We looked up his file. He is here for seven years and the offence is rape. The jail is not apparently able to cure him. He was brought in only two or three months ago and he has begun his trade in such a short time. Now we have to know whether the man is dead or still alive."

I inquired of the Superintendent whether I could see Rangam.

"We have been breaking so many rules and I suppose there is no harm. After all, you are her lawyer. I shall have to see her myself in any case and ensure that she is safely locked up."

Then he mentioned in a whisper so that others could not hear : "Only a few days ago, I told her, she would get a reprieve of three years. Fate is fate."

Then we went in. Rangam was walking in her cell. She had arranged her hair as well as she could and her saree was properly worn. The Superintendent said through the bars : "Mr. Shastri is here."

She spoke clearly and sufficiently loudly for us to hear. "I am very sorry, Sir. I shall speak out now, not like the last time. There was no other way. In another moment, he would have caught me by the throat and I couldn't have made a sound. Apparently, he was an expert at the game. The other two women were in a faint. It was either dishonour for me or death for him. I had the opportunity and I hit. There was no time to think of the rights and wrongs and the consequences."

Then she added :

"Please tell the police not to harass me to repeat all this again and again. I shall make a full statement

to the Magistrate as a confession straightaway. Then the rest can follow."

I mumbled and she must have heard what I said. "This is a setback. Let us see. Since everyone knows that you speak the truth and since there are two witnesses who may recover their power of speech, we have some hope. We have to know the condition of the man."

The police came soon after and wanted to take Rangam to the police station. I had no locus standi there then and remained silent, but the Jail Superintendent said that the alleged crime had taken place inside the jail and she was already in custody, being in imprisonment. For the moment, he had used his discretion and put her in solitary confinement. She could be taken out of the jail only on the orders of a Magistrate.

The Police Officer, an Inspector with two or three Head-constables stamped his feet and said he would have to question her and that could be done only in a police station. The Superintendent said that the rules did not permit her being taken out, but they could question her in jail itself to prepare their charge-sheet.

"But I should think," the Superintendent continued "the more important thing for you is to send for a doctor since he, being a prisoner, cannot also be taken out of jail. A Magistrate's orders are necessary unless a District Medical Officer gives in writing that he has to be removed to a hospital on an emergency basis, in which case you and the doctor can sign for his security and he can be removed to a hospital.

The Jail Superintendent was a senior man and he knew his rules well and the Police Officer was helpless. He sent one of them to fetch the District Medical Officer and they went in (I waited in the Superintendent's room) to see Rangam.

Later, the Jail Superintendent told me that the Inspector wanted the handcuffs to be put on her when, he explained, that this was not necessary as she was in a solitary confinement cell. Prisoners to be hanged were kept there without handcuffs.

Then Rangam told the Inspector briefly what she had told us earlier and said she would make a confessional statement straightaway. The police had no opportunity for display of muscle and he said he would come with a Magistrate's orders and take her to Court.

I was in Court, as is always my practice, a little earlier than the police and made a submission that the case was a very grave one but it would be premature for any charges to be brought as the state of the injured man had to be ascertained. As she was already a prisoner, and she was prepared to make a confessional statement, pending trial, she could only be sent back to jail. The Magistrate heard me and said that he would wait for the police statement. But he also felt that there was no other way out.

The police brought in Rangam about an hour after the Magistrate had ordered her to be produced in Court authorising the Jail Superintendent to transfer custody to the police for the purpose.

She was in handcuffs again and I was in agony to see her in this plight for what she had done was a heroic act, but she didn't flinch. The police officer submitted that, since it was uncertain whether the case would be one of assault, grievous assault or fatal assault, no charge-sheet could be framed. Since the accused was already undergoing life imprisonment for murder, she could only be sent back to jail-but the police should be given access to her for investigations.

I submitted as her lawyer that, since the alleged offence had been committed inside the jail, any investigation could only be conducted in the jail itself and the police should be entitled to do so. The accused had told the police as well as the Jail Superintendent that she would make a full statement, which could be legally treated as a confessional statement. This could be recorded and, thereafter, the police could conduct their own investigations.

Rangam produced a magnificent impression on everyone present with her forthright statement in flawless English, narrating every detail. The Magistrate wanted her to write it and she did so (the handcuffs were

removed on the orders of the Magistrate) in half an hour, signed it and gave it to him. The Magistrate ordered her to be sent back to the jail and gave permission for investigations to be carried on inside the jail by the police.

It was an extraordinary case in legal history in this part of the country and the newspapers had a field day with screaming headlines — “Killer woman hits again”, “Murderous assault inside jail” and so on. The confession having been made in court, reporters had plenty of material, but the police cautioned them that investigations were on and some clarification would have to be obtained about the incident. Could an assailant enter a cell without the connivance of a prisoner, was one of the questions which had to be answered, the police suggested. The police said they could not go merely by the confessional statement.

In the meanwhile, the prisoner, who had been removed to the hospital was found to have been injured in the head. There were no serious external injuries except some bruises but he had suffered according to doctors some serious internal injuries. But no definite conclusions could be drawn since the whole head had swollen up, particularly in the area where the chain had hit though there was no sign of blood coming out. One week, two weeks, a month, two months passed and the patient was in a state of coma. During this period, Rangam continued to be in solitary confinement except that she was taken out for exercise and the prisoners, on these occasions, clustered round her and the women embraced her and wept that she should be treated so harshly for her brave defence of her honour. Inevitably, Rangam suffered during these months and she became morose and angry again.

In the meanwhile, the old Jail Superintendent who had been friendly to her, retired and the man about whom he had given a warning to Rangam took his place. There was a dramatic change in the atmosphere from then. He straightaway ordered her to be in handcuffs, although in the solitary cell. He had her classified as a dangerous prisoner and had a police

testimony to justify this action. I had seen her once while the old Superintendent was there, but he cautioned me that the new man would not almost certainly allow him to meet her.

Rangam's case came up in the Sessions Court when at last, in the third month of the treatment in the hospital, the injured man regained consciousness. So, it was not a fatal assault but grievous assault. Police inquiries were complicated and the jail authorities came for stricture for leaving the shackles and chain inside a prison cell, which was what made the assault possible. The police did not give any thought to the possibility of the man, but for the defence put up by Rangam, committing the same offence inside the jail for which he had been sentenced to imprisonment for seven years.

After the police had framed the charge of attempted culpable homicide not amounting to murder, I was allowed to meet Rangam as my client.

She told me that this time she would co-operate with me in the trial, especially since the Prosecution was trying to slur over the fact that the victim had been convicted and condemned to imprisonment for seven years for the offence of rape.

But this did not help much as the Prosecution had spoken to other prisoners and raised doubts that an entry of the assailant into a woman's cell would have been possible only with the connivance of the prisoner in the particular cell. Rangam's co-prisoners, in their fear not to be drawn into this charge, declared on oath that they had not kept the door unbolted. The jail officials, now acting under the disciplinary orders of the new Superintendent, were equivocal.

The injured prisoner was brought to the court dramatically in a wheel chair and he stated on oath that the accused had given him an indication that he would be welcome to the cell and he had found the door open. The accused had built up an attitude of resistance when she found that her fellow prisoners had woken up and she decided to kill him to hide the truth.

I was amazed at this most fraudulent build-up of the case against my client, but all those who should have been my witnesses, being friendly and grateful to Rangam, were produced by the Prosecution as their witnesses having scared them out of their wits, saying they would be involved as accessories if they were foolish enough to disbelieve the police. My cross-examination was good but it was futile against women who would cry in the witness box and they said 'yes' to everything the Prosecutor suggested. My attempts to allay their fears were absolutely useless since they had been terrorised by the police and they uttered the most brazen lies. Rangam looked on with pity as the witnesses looked at her, crying and beating their heads over the lies they were uttering, but the Judge evidently misunderstood these gestures as directed against Rangam.

Rangam's best defence was her own replies to my questions and cross-examination by the Prosecution. She said that the cells were not bolted by the prisoners but by the jail authorities — it was they who had to make sure that the prisoners did not escape. In the present case, clearly, two cells were left unlocked — the prisoner's and also the victim's. Did the jail authorities have an answer for it ?

Rangam also pointed out that she had been eight years in jail, had done the work assigned to her by the jail authorities without a single occasion for any adverse remark against her. She had been permitted to study, particulars about which were all on record.

For the rest, she told the Prosecution in spirited replies, that it was time that women sought a law by which they could defend themselves and their honour, by killing an assailant if necessary. If the situation came again, she would have to act exactly as she had done as it was her right to defend her honour. And as for her co-prisoners who had given evidence against her, she asked, why should they cry when they spoke against her ? She had no opportunity to explain to them that the police could do nothing to them and

their threats were empty ones and pointless efforts to browbeat them.

The judge delayed his judgement by a few days. And ultimately, considering that Rangam had an earlier conviction for murder, he found he had no alternative but to sentence her to imprisonment for eight years for murderous assault, the sentence to run concurrently with her term of imprisonment. In effect, she would be in jail for two more years after her original sentence of fourteen years.

I was shattered. Since she would now lose her reprieve, instead of being in jail for 14 years she would be there for sixteen years. This for a woman who had desperately tried to defend her honour against assault by a convicted rapist !

Blood rushed up to my head as the judge read his judgement. My emotional attachment to Rangam by watching her closely and briefed by Sundaram about her noble qualities had grown to such an extent that I felt that it was my own Jaana whose battle I was fighting. She was my sister and you can imagine how it came to me like a frontal blow that she had to spend more years in jail. What was the use of my being a lawyer if I could not save her from this suffering, especially when what she deserved was a reward for bravery and not punishment. I felt I might burst into tears like a child. I saw Rangam looking at me.

Before she was taken away, she waited for a minute to have a word with me. She told me that she might still find some good in the extended term of imprisonment, since one most unexpected result of her earlier conviction was that her husband had been brought back to life.

But she was wrong. Her teacher had tried to prevent the new case against Rangam reaching Samban. But he came to know of it as he was now moving freely in the town and managed to get some newspapers which the teacher had assiduously kept away from him. He pleaded with the teacher to be allowed to go to Madura to see Rangam and tell the Court that

he was the guilty man and it was because of him his dear wife had to suffer. Sundaram told him that anything he could say would be of no avail to her and the Vakil would do the best for her. On the other hand, it would break Rangam's heart if he were to see her in her present plight "You may be right, Sundaranna," he said. "I don't want to add to her suffering."

But his mind was on Rangam all the time. The poor man became almost insane repeating this tragic self-denunciation and nothing Sundaram could say would console him. But finally, when the judgement came, he became silent. Two days later, he committed suicide by jumping from the local railway bridge into the river which, that year, was unusually flooded. Rangam thus became a widow at thirty-one. She did not say anything when I conveyed the news to her.

The new Jail Superintendent gave me permission to meet Rangam only after getting his special permission each time. I noted that she had reverted back to her vacant, desperate look.

It was another three months before I met her again. She looked haggard, emaciated as she had never looked before. I dared not ask her the reason. I told her that Shyamali had attained puberty. She had completed twelve. Sheela was behind, though a little older. I told her I decided that I would think of their marriage only after they had completed their education.

Rangam said nothing.

I met my old friend the peon and asked him why Rangam was looking so weak and ill. He said that she had been put to hard physical labour. She had to carry bricks and mortar on her head like any other convict, man or woman, and the new jail Superintendent had declared that there was no need for her to be shown any special consideration "because she can speak English." She had neither protested nor complained. He said that the Jail Superintendent had seen her one day carrying loads on her head without

any protest and had felt sorry. The last order he passed was that she should be reverted back to desk duty. Two days later, he died of apoplexy. The doctors gave excessive drinking as the reason.

Chapter 10

I have been in this jail now for fifteen years. I came here when I was twenty-two and I am now thirty-seven. No one, I am told, has been in this prison for a longer term. I have no mirror to see my face. Indeed, I have not looked at myself ever since that day I looked into my mirror and put on kumkumum on my forehead. What is the charm the Vakil finds in me ?

I heard a few days ago that the old Superintendent had died. He had been like a patron to me and I had begun to feel that he was my father. I have not known — I do not remember — what my father was like, but my uncle used to tell me that my mother had his, that is, my uncle's features and that I had my father's features. Keeping this in mind, I used to search for my own features, as I remembered them, in the old Jail Superintendent's face. It was an amusing exercise. There never was the smallest resemblance. I did not know when I was a girl, but I know now that, possibly I have some Aryan features, longish face with sharp nose and small mouth and light eyes. I remember the face I saw in the mirror. The Jail Superintendent had a rounded face, with a big rounded nose and thick lips. He was dark and I had what they call a light wheatish complexion, nearer to 'fair' than to 'dark'. But he had very kindly eyes (while they called mine 'sparkling' by which I think they meant 'naughty') and, though hard, an appealing — sometimes I would think, a musical voice.

Must be very different from my father if what my uncle said of my being 'an image of my father' be true. But, I suppose, I thought of him so, emotionally, because he treated me like a daughter keeping only the facade of a jail official. How funny people are ! Sometimes, they appeal to you and sometimes they repel you. The other cruel man who succeeded him, was, one might say, good-looking, but he had a most

vicious manner about him, wiping his face all the time as if he had to clean himself — you know, Lady Macbeth type. I wish he had drunk less and lived longer, for, with the killing work he has given me, I might have fallen ill and died and my story would have ended there and I would have been burnt away with all my shame and my heroism. But I learnt that the strange man, a little before he died, transferred me to what they call here, desk duties, my old laundry accounting and all that. I touched pen and paper then after about a year or more.

The two women who fooled themselves by giving the evidence the police wanted against me, only later understood what they had done and, when I explained to them about it, they were in great grief and wept and asked me to forgive them. They have now gone, to freedom. But I told them before they left, that there was no sanctity in marriage if it meant that it was a one-sided affair. In my case, it was, ironically, one-sided but in a different sense, because I was the superior party, but I deliberately helped my husband to be himself, master of his own mind, and the poor man died when he gained this awareness. I loved him, I have always loved him from the day he put his hand on me as my husband, for he was mine and it was my duty to serve him and help him, especially because he was weak. I knew after a few days that his was not a congenital deficiency. In such cases, if you watch a man or a woman carefully, you will know. You will see what you may call the inner man in a flash now and then, when, of a sudden, he says something, reacts in a certain way. So it was with me. I saw that in him and I knew some day, he would be my own strong man who would tell me when I went wrong. But that was not to be. He died — and in a tragic way. I am glad in one sense, however, because he showed God he could be one better. In our religion, God is supposed to be the protector of the weak. He was weak, wasn't he? Did he protect him? Pushed into a manger as my teacher discovered! Well, let me forget all that. It

hurts me. His redemption as a man came from himself, not from God. He sentenced himself to death for what God did to him — and to me, to me more than to him !

Let that be. I told these women to stand upright before any man, but “if someone tries tricks on you, don’t sit and weep but hit back, kill and die. Womanhood can vindicate itself only that way.”

So, they went away. The poisoner went first and then the woman who was saved from the well. I was alone again.

When this new Superintendent came, he looked into my case — they can’t help it. I have that in me — one look and they keep looking at me, openly at first and furtively later. I know that. Don’t think I am vain. I am not what they call a pretty woman. But I am a woman and, I imagine, to my great sorrow and embarrassment, I have a lot of it in me. I feel like weeping sometimes — why can’t I be like a dry weed, like that woman, the poisoner. She might have lived a virgin all her life. Not even Satthi might have been a danger.

Anyway, one day this new Superintendent spoke to me at length in my cell when I was trying to read some book after my chores. One thing about this long, long imprisonment. All the warders and all the peons were my friends. They took me to be one of them — permanent residents. So, no one was surprised when the new Superintendent, who was a great admirer of my old Superintendent and had a good record, came and talked to me wanting to hear my story at first hand. He said he had read my story in the newspapers and felt that I was a very demon. I thought I was going to like this man.

After hearing me, not for one day but quite often on different aspects of my case, he said that I was more “sinned against than sinning.” That was Shakespeare, I exclaimed. He lighted up. He looked at me and I could not help smiling. In a moment, we were friends. Yes, he loved Shakespeare. Then, why didn’t he study ? Why did he join this nasty service ?

He was laughing away. "I know only Shakespeare and Dickens and Tagore and nothing else. To pass examinations, you have to be good at mathematics and other subjects. I was a zero there. I failed miserably but I did come through my B.A. with a Herculean effort and then my father spoke to a friend and I was pushed into this service through the back-door. That is how I became a jailer. What a fall ! I made little progress and I was unpopular with the bosses — 'too soft' was the verdict — and so here I am with five years to go for retirement talking to you about Shakespeare."

Indeed, he took kindly to me and, to my surprise, he found some loopholes in the rules and so disclosed to me one day, I would be released the next week.

"That is only fifteen years. I thought the Vakil mentioned sixteen years — fourteen plus two," I exclaimed.

"Not fifteen, not sixteen, but fifteen years, two months and twenty-two days ! You will be a free woman," he joked. "And thereafter, if you come anywhere near here, I will be a different man — no Shakespeare then."

So, when I was thirty-seven years and a few months, I walked out of jail. The Vakil had come earlier and brought two of my own old sarees which I had in my own house, which that wonderful man had carefully preserved and given to the Jail Superintendent. I wore one of them and was wondering what next, when the Superintendent told me smiling ; "Your Vakil will be here soon to take you home."

It was a sweet moment, for, for most of the warders, normally rough people, who had gradually learnt to be kind to me and then like me and, after the months of ill-treatment by the malicious predecessor of the present Superintendent, began to admire me for my fortitude, all came and gave me their good wishes and hoped that God would be kind to me. I was indeed greatly touched, but said to myself that fifteen years of imprisonment was too big a price to earn such esteem.

And then the Vakil was there on time. He shook hands with the Superintendent and we both came out of the big gate. There was his car waiting and the chaffeur came and opened the door. The Vakil came near me and asked me to step in and he came in after me. He sat near me. I felt very strange indeed. Most of the time, we had seen each other only through double rows of bars, except when we had met in Court when both of us had to preserve a great deal of reserve.

I felt I owed everything I knew by way of kindness and grace to this man. He had served me as only a man who loved a woman passionately would serve. I felt he loved me so. I thought he wanted me and some day he would have me. It was not a coarse kind of lust but love, good, noble sincere love. Only such love endures. I had felt so for a long time and you can imagine how it can hurt — a woman in travail being chased so. But it was love and I told myself, what had I to lose? My husband was dead. My teacher had more or less forsaken me. I had not had a word from him directly or indirectly for a long time. And I was a dead woman, dead to the world of respectability, dead to myself. I thought I owed everything to this man for his immeasurable consideration for me and I could deny him nothing — and I wouldn't.

We reached home. I did not know when I used to see him across the prison bars, patiently waiting and greeting me regularly every fortnight almost without a break for fifteen years, that he lived in such a big bungalow with a spacious lawn and garden. Affluence was written all over the place. The Vakil had said nothing. I was so utterly overwhelmed by the drama of my being taken out from a prison straight into a luxurious car — I had never known a car ride before — having spent most of all my life either in poverty or the rigours of a prison — and now to a luxurious mansion. "What is this new drama for you, Rangan?" I was asking myself and blood was rushing to my head and, in a few moments, I felt I

would break into tears. I had definitely become "soft", I told myself.

The car slowed down as we entered the portico. We got down and a small box I had been allowed to keep in jail for my books was taken out by the chauffeur.

As I entered the magnificent veranda with low cane chairs kept round small tables on either side, apparently for visitors, I felt strange. Here was another play of the Gods. "We are such stuff as dreams are made of..." My legs were growing heavy. I thought I would trip and fall. Dream, dream, it was all a dream. The words were echoing in my mind.

But I had not much time to think. The lady of the house came up and greeted me with unexpected familiarity.

"Come in Rangam, we have been waiting for you."

She put an arm round me and took me in. I was speechless, overwhelmed. This familiarity, this regard — I had never known it before. My uncle used to pet me now and then, but my aunt would make some cynical remark: "His sister's child is dearer to him than his own children," something like that. Then I would be shy and get away from his lap and smile at him. You know I have never been a cry baby.

All those thoughts came to me when that lady whom I had not seen before took me in. Was I in prison for fifteen years? Did I kill someone? Was I tried in a Court? All those were lies and dreams when I felt this gracious lady's arm round me.

"We have a room for you, Rangam," she said. "In our old house, we had only one room, apart from the sitting room and a small room which was the lawyer's office. This is a big house. He gets so much money it is hard for me to believe we are no longer poor and I dread pomp and show. My husband's best friends are his case files, not even his clients who pay him.

We went through the drawing room, showing the affluence of the family, in the furniture, the curtains and decorative pieces ("All this is Shyamali's and

Sheela's money-spending, time-killing work") to an inner room on one side. "I hope you won't feel lonely here. The children sleep upstairs, but we are always here, downstairs, You may come in any time you want and please feel free. This house is as much yours as mine."

As simple as that ! No fuss; no grand phrases — "please feel free." I pinched myself. "No, no, this cannot be true. All those horrible things did happen and I am sure the lady knows all about it.

I could not say even 'thanks' and at last blurted out : "I hope you know me."

"Very well, Rangam. You are the woman my husband loves as much as he loves me (!!!) and you will be here with us, now for ever and ever. Why don't you tell her ?" she added turning to her husband who was behind us.

"Yes, of course, we have been looking forward to it, isn't it ?" he said.

"Rangam," he called me by name familiarly, "Shyamali and Sheela aren't here. They are in Madras. (Shyamali and Sheela, not Sheela and Shyamali). They insisted on their going to college and we were not in favour, but finally we had to agree. They will come here for the vacation and they have one more year. Then, we must think of their marriage.

I was like a member of the family who had come home after an interval — no stranger, no stranger at all and no jail bird !

I spent a sleepless night. I didn't see the steel bars. I didn't hear the cling clang of metal and I didn't feel the foul odour of a prison. Across the window, I saw the bushes and the flowers. A soft wind was blowing when I stood near the window. A clock chimed three. Then I lay down and fell off to sleep and woke with a start with a feeling that I had over-slept. I had not. Dawn was just breaking, but someone had got up, probably the cook. I went near the door and turned the handle but was afraid to open it. I shouldn't disturb anyone.

As I came back to my bed, the door gently opened

and the lady came in smiling, fresh as the morning.

"You have got up, Rangam," she asked. "We didn't expect you to be up before eight. He (The husband is never referred to by name, it will shorten his life — so it will always be 'He') told me not to make any noise. 'Poor thing may not have slept for years.' I am glad, however, to see you awake. I could not believe you were with us and I longed to come and see in the night. Well, big houses are a nuisance. They make you feel lonely. Gopi — that is my son — is also a quiet boy any you seldom know whether he is in the house or not. He has gone to a friend's place and is staying there for two or three days. With my husband always going out or busy with his cases, I have only myself for company."

We all sat together round a table at breakfast — I thought I was in some island of Monte Cristo — and the lady went on talking.

"Please don't think, Rangam, we have always been like this. We have not been accustomed to all this nonsense in our old house where we used to sit down on the floor and eat and started this eating-at-the-table business only now. In this street, He says, one has to live up to the Joneses — whatever that means."

"Rangam," Mr. Narayana Shastri told me. "There are two things you like, I know. One, I found for myself, is books. There are plenty here. Shyamali naturally takes after you. She loves books, but unlike you, she eats them up — they are in tatters when she finishes with them. She is with books always — on the bed, at the table, on the steps of the veranda, on the lawn, up on a tree branch. She is always either reading or singing (Shyamali, my Shyamali, my own, my own — tears were welling up in my eyes). She sings well, but we stopped her music tutor as I don't want her to be diverted from her studies. Sheela is not like that. Lawyer's daughter, she is very orderly, sits at her desk, patiently like me for hours and hours, every book has a book mark, everything is arranged on the table. There is hell to pay when she goes near

Shyamali's table and tries to arrange it. Shyamali would cry : "You have upset everything — where is my Hardy, my 'As you Like It' ? Why, the shrill notes which come from that room ! Sheela's mother (It is always 'Sheela's mother' not Saraswati or Chachu as — later I found — her friends call the lawyer's wife) has the worst of it."

"Why don't you say you miss all that noise now?" she said and laughed.

Mr. Shastri smiled and went off to his room. At 10.30 a.m. the chaffeur brought the car and he went to the Court. "We send the lunch to him," the lady explained to me.

I could not understand all this. I could not understand really the genuine kindness and friendliness of the lady. I have cut off the word altruism from my dictionary. Why, why, the question was coming to me again and again in my mind. I thought he was a poor lawyer with normal (privately I would call it 'animal') instincts who wished to have me and adopt me as a 'keep'. That is what they say about the second woman. Here it was all respectable. A second woman could not have any place. Why then ? I decided to find the answer.

Two evenings later, I was sitting in the balcony attached to the upstairs room while the lady was downstairs. The lawyer came up to me, I thought, to talk to me.

"Why are you here alone, Rangam ?" he asked.

"I am haunted by so many thoughts," I said.

"I thought so, dear. You should forget all that. You are now in a new world, born to a new life."

I had my cue. I gently whispered : "May I ask you something ?"

"Why do you hesitate ? You ask me anything," he said smiling.

"Why do you do all this for me ?" I said with grief and passion in my voice. "You know I am an unworthy, bad woman. You know it more than anybody else. Why have you brought me here ? What can I do for you ? How can I ever repay you ? I

can only submit myself to you."

He looked at me for a moment. He must have seen how sad and grieved I was, having watched me for years and years — and then he must have suddenly suspected my meaning — just a glint. His face became red, he became almost convulsive and covered it with both hands and cried in a terrible, agonised voice. "Oh, Jaana, Jaana, would you say that to me?"

The sound of our talk must somehow have reached downstairs. His wife came up in a hurry.

The lawyer was standing in agitation and he exclaimed to her. "Tell her why I love her," he paused. "It is my fault, I suppose. I should have told her." Then he walked away.

She led me to a side room. "This is the room the girls keep for themselves, talking and laughing all the time — and studying. This is Shyamali's table and this is Sheela's. (The lawyer had been right. Sheela's table was tidy and neat while Shyamali's had all kinds of books and papers on it in utter chaos.)

"Now tell me what do you want to know?"

"I am unable to understand sister — may I call you sister?"

"No, you must call me 'Manni' (elder brother's wife). Didn't He give you Karthikai gifts? That was to make you understand. We had given a lot of thought to it."

"Manni" (It was so sweet to utter that homely word) I said. "I could not understand why he has been so kind to me, why he has taken so much trouble for a woman who has gone astray, a bad woman, a criminal who should have been left to herself to face her fate. I asked him and told him that he should tell me what he wanted — and being a bad woman, you know I am a bad woman — I asked him what could I give him. I did not know I would upset him. He was terribly hurt. 'Oh, Jaana, Jaana,' he said. I could not understand. I think I hurt him somehow."

"Yes, you hurt him," she said, not angrily but sadly. "But let me tell you, Rangam, this first: We know, He and I, you are not a bad woman. Do you

think he would have brought you here if you were a bad woman? He is a clever lawyer and is a very shrewd judge of people. Let the Court call you bad, let the newspapers call you bad, let the public call you bad. You are not a bad woman. Not all people whom Fate plays with viciously are bad. So, you can get that out of your mind.

"Now, why has he been serving and suffering for you? There is a story behind it. My husband was born, not very poor, but poor, but the family became very poor when they lost their property in litigation. My husband was very young then and he decided to become a lawyer to help all poor people like his father who lost everything because they could not fight their case with the help of good lawyers. With great difficulty his father educated him and, as he had hoped, he became a lawyer and began taking up all cases which others refused to take up or were incapable of doing so.

"But that was not the reason he rushed to help you. They were only two children to their parents. He and his young sister who died when she was twelve or so, he thinks, because his parents could not afford to provide the emergency treatment she needed. This girl and he were not only brother and sister but the best of friends. There is nothing like poverty to bring the children in a family close together. So, they grew up and he was heart broken when she died. He never recovered from this grief.

"Long ago, may be twenty years or more, on the day of our nuptials, he told me about his sister. And then he told me — I shall tell you exactly what he said : "Chachu, I saw a girl in Sundaram's school who is very much like her — twelve years old or so just as my dearest Jaana was when she went — not only the same face, but the very smile and laughter and spirit, all Jaana's. I saw her only from a distance but I thought it was my Jaana come back to life.' He told me that the girl was very poor and he found out that she was married to a poor village boy doing nothing and not capable of doing much. He was very

unhappy. 'I would like to help that girl, Chachu. How can I do it?' You are that girl, Rangam. Can you understand now?

"You know, that was on his mind for a long time. Later, he learnt that you had gone to live with your husband. And then it was that your case came in the papers. He dropped all his pending cases and rushed to Tiruchuzhi. You cannot know the agony he passed through. I did not want to argue with him since he loved Jaana and he was living with her memory whenever he was with you. Can you understand now? You are not Rangam to him—but his dearest, his own sister Jaana. That was why he was with you as often as he could be."

I heard that story narrated so simply and artlessly. I remained silent and slowly the truth began to sink into me—the enormity of the mistake I had made, how deeply I had hurt him. Something seemed to press on my heart. On God, what have I done—to the man who had made an idol of me, a fond loving brother. Good God, God, what a sin.

At this time, he came upstairs again and when I saw him I fell at his feet, caught them and burst out. It was as if my heart would burst—tears came like a flood. Feelings which had been suppressed for fifteen years, burst like a massive dam giving way. Perhaps, it was not this shock alone which swept me off my feet. I had suffered many shocks, many, one after another. But this was the last straw, I suppose. I broke down. I was choking, hysterical. I could not control myself. How could I look at him in the face again. All the crimes I had done were no crimes but this was. This to a man who had personified me and reincarnated me as his sister—Jaana, Jaana, he had exclaimed. I was a sinner.....terrible, it was terrible.

I cried and cried, shaking and gasping uncontrollably. They were frightened after a time. They got me up. He helped me, to get on to a chair, stroked my head.

"Rangam, nobody cries like that. It was a genuine mistake. I would have committed the same mistake

if I had gone through all the horrible things you have suffered. Rangam, you are Jaana to me, my dead Jaana returned to life. Please, please, please, don't weep. You are with us now. It is your family. You have a brother, a manni, a nephew and a niece — and of course your own daughter though she does not know you. Please.....”

Tears do dry up and my breath slowly came back to me. I wiped my eyes and looked at him and smiled.

“How bad I have become,” I said. “Nothing but bad thoughts in my mind. A jail does not cure mental patients — it creates mental patients.”

“I am sorry, Anna,*” I added in a low tone. “I must call you ‘Anna’ who but a brother would have done all you have done for me. Please forgive me. I don't know what else to say.”

“I am glad now I broke out into tears instead of storing up the grief in my mind, which is what I usually do. Come to think of it — can you believe? This is the first time I have wept in my life. My dear teacher, Sundaram, used to say : I have never seen Rangam except as a smiling girl. But so much has happened since. There must be some good left in me, I think. I can weep !”

The mist cleared. The question which I had been asking myself ever since he first came to me as my lawyer was answered. At long last I felt I had come back to a world which once used to smile on me.

* Elder brother.

Chapter 11

Rangam was with us for two months. It took barely a week for her to get settled in her new environment. I think of her always as Jaana come back to me after many years through some trick of the Gods. Only my Jaana could recover her spirits like this. After that awful day, it appeared as if she had been released from some burden she had been carrying in her mind. She calls me 'Anna' and it seems the bond of fifteen years had sprouted at last into a beautiful relationship. She tells me and my wife how morose she used to be in jail and laughs over it — my Jaana's laugh.

Gopi came back after two days and she behaved so naturally like a mother towards her son or an affectionate aunt towards her nephew that he did not feel strange with her, though he is quite reserved by nature. We had not taken him into confidence and he was made to understand that she was a relative of Sundaram mama in Tiruchuzhi who was looking for a job for which I had promised some help. As the close friendship between me and Sundaram was well-known, the boy took her stay with us as a matter of course.

But he liked her and was surprised at her knowledge. He was in the Junior B.A. and she told him that she did not have a regular education, but one casual talk led to another about studies and he found he could talk to her about his subjects and they began to spend a lot of time together. She loved a laugh and his narrative of life in College interested her greatly and she enjoyed his jokes about his teachers and class fellows. She learnt what he liked and to his own and his mother's surprise, she went to the kitchen and helped the cook to make it for him and thus she always took him by surprise and they had always a good laugh over it.

I could now understand how Rangam as a girl

had been a favourite of everyone. She was a natural member of any team for fun or work.

My wife and I after a great deal of thought decided that it would be best if a suitable employment was found for her so that she might feel that she was on her own feet and had an independent means of income. There was a Domestic Science College for women in Madras and a visitor to our city told me that they were planning to have a hostel and would want a good Assistant Warden. The Principal of the College was to be in nominal charge and the Assistant would be called upon to do a lot of responsible work.

It was a Herculean task to get a character clearance for Rangam with her tragic criminal record, but two factors were in her favour. First, it was a women's institution and it was put to the high-ups there (we decided not to hide anything) that Rangam had got into trouble because of her desperate effort to defend her honour and that of other women. Also, numerous testimonials were presented about her merit, good conduct and excellent character. Second, the Judge who sentenced her had made a special point about the strong hopes of her rehabilitation. He had now become a Judge of the High Court in Madras and his words counted for much.

We decided to sell her village house (which became hers after the death of her husband) for what it was worth and deposited the money in a Bank Account for her. It was a delight for me to see Rangam, whom I had known in her most miserable days, full of cheer once again and, like Jaana, her original, she took me by surprise by her playfulness, though she was not a girl any more, and the freedom she took with me as a sister. I was full of gratitude to my wife who made this new life possible for Rangam by her great tact to put this girl with her unfortunate history totally at ease and Rangam indeed became most affectionate to both of us.

Our efforts to get Rangam fixed up in a job at last bore fruit and, as an experimental measure, Mrs. Ranganayaki Sambasivan became Assistant

Warden in this small hostel attached to the College in Madras. Rangam proved her merit and qualities in the very first months and drew commendation from all who came into contact with her. In a year, she was running the place, working tirelessly. She had education as well as a soft and happy temperament so that the hostel residents gave her both respect and affection.

I was happy that Rangam was at last settled. Shyamali had finished her B.A. (Hons.) course in Madras together with Sheela. We had now to think of their marriage. On return from Madras, they took us into confidence about her preference for a boy from Bangalore whom they had met at an inter-collegiate function. Shyamali said that she did not want to hide anything from them and she had nothing to hide. The decision about her future would rest with them as her parents, but both Sheela and she had talked about it and decided that they should inform their parents that the boy came from a respectable family, though not of their particular sub-caste, and had been attracted by Shyamali and had asked whether, if he came into the I.A.S. (which was the same as the old I.C.S., the most prestigious bureaucratic service) her parents would consent to their marriage. He had assured her — he had spoken to Sheela also — that it was nothing beyond an expression of mutual friendship. There was no reference to Sheela in this context as it was more or less settled in the family that she would marry my widowed cousin's son who was doing law and we hoped that he would one day succeed me in the profession.

My wife and I felt that, considering her peculiar situation, it would be best if Shyamali's wishes were respected. The young man had been very cautious but had expressed his desire in no uncertain terms to both Shyamali and Sheela. We told the girls that there was no hurry in regard to it and we could come to a decision at leisure. Shyamali did not know that what we had in mind was to ascertain the wishes of Rangam.

Accordingly I went to Madras and met her. I

found her transformed in appearance and she was full of her natural grace and cheer.

"What is this magic, Rangam?" I exclaimed. "You don't look a day older than when I first saw you though that was under tragic circumstances. You look like the young mother you were — like that American film star who got 'the most beautiful mother' prize.

I was thrilled to see Rangam smile and blush. "I am all right, Anna. After all there is a bit of a rogue hidden in every man — you flatter me though flattery does make me quite proud. I am what you have made me, Anna. I would be ungracious to you if I think of my past and sit and mope. I do think a lot of Him, not in a selfish way but both of us would have been so happy, both of us having been taken out of our hell. I do feel depressed sometimes, but I think of you and I forget everything. I long to see my Shyamali — at least from a distance."

"I am also anxious to restore her to you, Rangam," I told her. "She is just like you. Where she is, there is only cheer and joy. I am so happy when I think Sheela got her for company. Sheela is shy and reserved by temperament and Shyamali has literally drawn her out of her den as it were and made her also a happy-go-lucky girl.

"Actually, Rangam, I came to Madras to talk to you about Shyamali". I told her about the proposal. She endorsed it at once with the qualification that Shyamali had become our daughter and she would not be an interloper. She would welcome any decision we might take and, generally speaking, she would say, if Shyamali was attracted by the boy and he had a good record we should go by her wishes.

"Our old days are gone, Anna," she said. "These are grown-up, educated girls. How I long to see my twins!" she said again.

Poor Rangam! What a life she had had, yet here she was, happy and cheerful and trying to recreate a house out of the debris the years had made of her life. She showed me the work she had been doing

and, as I listened to her, I felt how God had been very unkind to her and kept her buried in a jail for fifteen years. Rangam read my mind and said : "Don't think of the past, Anna. Let us forget it and attend to the job we have in hand."

I told her also about our plans for Sheela and when I returned to Madura, I told my wife that we could take it that both the marriages were settled from our side. Of course, Shyamali's young man had made his marriage dependent on his passing the I.A.S. examination, saying that, otherwise, he would not be worthy of Shyamali.

Nevertheless, my wife and I decided to take a trip to Bangalore and we met the boy's parents and invited them to Madura. The exchange of visits was fruitful and the marriage was agreed upon. The young man's name was Madhusudhan and, though originally from Madras, having shifted to Bangalore, instead of the traditional 'Iyer', the caste name, the family had adopted the surname 'Rao'. His parents told us that Madhu was an extremely smart boy and was sure to come into the I.A.S. and he did.

So, Shyamali was married the next summer and Madhu's parents were immensely pleased when they saw Shyamali bubbling with happiness. We told Rangam that she should come and bless Shyamali but she declared that so far as Shyamali was concerned, it was best that Rangam remained as she was, unknown and forgotten. I learnt later, Rangam prepared some sweets and distributed them to the hostel students and her colleagues on that day saying that it was a day of happy thoughts for her.

A few weeks later, I celebrated Sheela's wedding with my cousin's son Balachandran and, then also Rangam did not come saying that it was best if she did not provoke any awkward questions.

It is twenty years since I first entered the Court as Rangam's lawyer. I am now turned fifty-three and my wife, four years younger to me, is happy and proud that her husband has become the leading lawyer in the city with plenty of money and several juniors

under him. At home, Sheela's baby son, my grandson, kept us busy and the house was full of light and joy.

The sun it seems, is shining all over our family. Shyamali has gone to the north with her husband and Sheela is with us with her husband and son. We do miss Gopi, our son very much. When he secured admission to a U.S. College of Engineering, we were worried about his having to go abroad but we were eventually persuaded to agree. He went to Madras and took leave of his dear Rangam aunty before flying to New York. When we returned after seeing him off from Bombay, Sheela gave us a letter from Rangam saying that she was coming to spend a few days with us.

Chapter 12

If I had my way, I would not have chosen to settle in Madras. Life here is an extremely crude amalgam of highly artificial sophistication and hopelessly conservative obscurantism. Caste consciousness flourishes side by side with angry demonstrations against this society.

But like the proverbial Englishman, I made my home my castle. It was in a sense cut away from the mainstream of our social life. I had very little to do with the college which had a big building, some 200 yards away from the hostel. There was a lot of crowd, bustle and activity there, though, being a women's college, there was more discipline and order. They had a Sports Section, but very few took serious interest in it. In the hostel, therefore, except the distant drone of the prattle, I lived in an environment of calm and quiet.

But I am not a quiet person myself and my preoccupation was how to keep the girls interested in healthy activities. Having been in prison most of my adult life, I had missed the joy of living and I wanted the girls to be eager, curious and open-minded. I had to move cautiously, I reminded myself all the time, because of my black record and I thought my superiors would always have in their minds the question : What is this woman up to ? They cannot know of course that I too was a good girl at one time with light and love in my heart. They had some kind of a Committee which, under the Principal, had arranged a routine in different departments, catering, cleaning up of the rooms, attendance, "outing" for the hostellers, contacts with guardians etc. I had a small room for my little office and a room adjoining it, for my residence. I was expected to be on duty twenty-four hours to enable any resident or the staff to contact me. There was a telephone which I had to keep an eye on all the time, but, if I was called away by any work, one of my

lieutenants an old man (a former peon in the College inducted into the job) and a woman who had been an ayah previously with a European family, had to be there to attend it.

The Principal had been informed about my background so that I could occasionally detect a note of caution and concern in her dealings with me. She was ex-officio Chief Warden and there was a Professor who was the Warden and I was an assistant given the honorific of Assistant Warden. There was the semblance of a straight jacket, for my duties were all clearly defined and I might slip up if I tried to change them in any way.

I was often listless, for I was idle most of the time once the routine was attended to, and I hated idleness. In school, as some teachers used to say, I was always 'throbbing with life' finding plenty of time to do all kinds of odd work, being at the same time upto date with my studies. It was more to keep me quiet that my teachers gave me extra work in the library, in the entertainment section, debating society and so on. This is how I came to know many teachers including the Headmaster.

In jail, after the first few months when I lived in a state of shock, I began gradually to take an interest in my surroundings and I was given more and more work and I began to enjoy it. The Jail Superintendent as I knew later was keeping an eye on me and was happy with my interest in every work I had to attend to. Thus, from cleaning the rooms, my sphere went on extending to the laundry, accounts, evening classes and finally my own studies. The only thing I did not do in jail was to sing and dance which was my special "extra-curricular" activity in school; and in the *agraharam*, where I had lived with my husband and child I had in a small way begun singing classes (I thought I could also eventually earn a little this way) and occasional entertainment programmes in the temple on festive occasions.

So, you can imagine how depressed I felt when, weighed down by my criminal record, I had to suppress

all my social instincts and spend my time attending to my set jobs as best as I could. I did well perhaps, since after three or four months, the Principal complimented me one day by saying. "You have not given any headaches, Rangam, and I am happy that the affairs of the hostel have not caused us any worry. We will be having a meeting of our Committee as the current year's academic term ends and I would like you to come and give a report on the activities of the hostel and put forward any suggestion you may have, to improve the arrangements. After all, for all practical purposes, the hostel is in your charge, since the Professor in charge has been away most of the time."

I was in transport looking forward to the day when I would meet this Committee. I had collected a lot of files and when I went with them to the Committee meeting, the Principal exclaimed: "What is this, Rangam? You are running a Secretariat?" I merely smiled and said the Committee had to know the work that was being done in the hostel.

"Yes, yes, of course," the Principal said. "Do explain to them all this. I am afraid you will have to do this as, honestly, I do not know what you have been doing."

In fact, I had to do a lot of talking. Besides some senior members of the staff, there were one or two outsiders who had the control of the finance.

I told them first that the hostel had provision for a hundred students and there were now only sixty girls staying there. It would be more economical if all the seats were occupied. This point impressed them because every move for economy gets an unfailing welcome in any public institution. I also mentioned that the maintenance staff — one man and one woman servant — was inadequate for the thirtyfive rooms we had, on two floors. Eye-brows were raised, but I quickly followed up my comment with the suggestion that this was an institution where we were training girls in domestic science and it would perhaps be an extension of the curriculam if the girls were made to attend to their own rooms, so that the resident girls would be

responsible for the tidiness and order in their respective rooms, instead of an outside servant coming in to do this work. We might institute some prizes for the well-kept rooms if the Committee approved.

"Excellent, excellent," the Principal cried out. "We ought to have thought of it ourselves. We can utilise the servants for the common rooms and the general cleaning up. You had better make a start when the College reopens after the vacation."

"Any other suggestion?" one of the professors asked.

"I am putting it forward only as an idea and shall be guided by the Committee's directions," I resumed. "During the time I have been here, I have noticed that, once the college hours are over, the hostel residents have plenty of idle time. They can't start reading in their rooms immediately after coming from their lectures. The result is they get together in groups and gossip and there is a turmoil when arguments develop. I think it will be good if they have some kind of a reading room where magazines are provided (for which a small additional charge may be added to their hostel fees.) There is one big room which can be used for some indoor games and we may also have a small court for badminton without extra expenses. In course of time, this may attract some of the students of the College also and perhaps we may get more residents for the college hostel."

"I say, I am not surprised. You are a woman with ideas. They spoke to me in superlatives and told me to watch you. I do think now they have not exaggerated. We must write and thank your sponsors for the job here and I think we had better leave the hostel in your charge, Rangam. I hope you all agree."

Every one smiled and nodded assent.

"You are on your own, my dear girl, (The Principal had never been familiar with me earlier) and give us a monthly report and do anything you like — but no additional expense, please. Otherwise, I shall have worries."

I spent four years in the hostel as Assistant

Warden. The next year, the Principal re-organised the control machinery, making me full Warden helped by an Advisory Committee which, on my suggestion, included two resident students in the final year of their academic course. The hostel was full of life and, for the annual day of the College, the hostel girls contributed a number of programmes. At long last, I had a field of my own. It was as if there was a blank space between the twenty-second and thirty-seventh years of my life which was buried and forgotten.

I paid two visits to Madura where my Anna and Manni who had adopted me as their own sister, were so proud of me that I thought I was becoming an article of display.

"You are looking younger every day Rangan and, if only you had a kumkum on your forehead, people would say you are a happy young house-wife. Who will say you are forty-two?" That is what my Manni said once.

I was in good health and in good cheer. I had been using my spare time for reading and, because the College had an excellent general library which was open to me and we had all kinds of the latest magazines, I had everything I wanted.

We had many visitors at Anna's house and he would introduce me to them as a relative who was Warden in a College Hostel in Madras. He began gradually to note that I had become so well-informed and clear-headed and had a power of speech (about which He had been surprised when I was giving my evidence in the second case in Court) which took him by surprise when distinguished lawyers and scholars, who called, found pleasure in talking to me. I was invited to their homes and a local club wanted me to give a talk, but I avoided all this saying that I was pining for a quiet time and would rather stay at home spending all my time with my dear Manni.

"You are really a bad woman," Anna exclaimed one day when only we three were at home talking. "With all these talents, you did not open your mouth at that first trial and when I met you times without

number. You could have saved me a lot of trouble. Do you know — ask your manni — I had come home sometimes in tears after meeting you ?”

“I am not sorry, Anna,” I replied. “What could I do ? Now you know me, it is all right. Then, I would have sounded presumptuous, arrogant, talking too much. No, it is just as well that I kept my bla bla mouth firmly shut.”

“No, Anna,” I continued softly, “that is not the truth, let me confess. I am sorry I am shamming. In those days, I could not talk. My heart was full of all kinds of desperate and angry thoughts. It took all of me to hold together without becoming insane. Yes, it was the spirit within me which kept me going. True, I did not talk to you, but I wrote a great deal. Well, I had better not go on that. I survived, thanks to you, Anna, in a hundred ways and now I live happily, again thanks to you and manni, in a hundred ways.”

I was very free with them now like a real sister and the puck in me was up again.

“Do you know, Anna, dealing with judges and Courts, you have begun to look like a judge, with your benevolent smile and your glasses slipping down your nose and your little stoop. I do feel quite often I am looking at a judge.”

“You are not only a bad woman, but, a veritable devil,” Anna said laughing. He turned to Manni and asked :”. “Do you follow what she says ?”

“What are you saying, Rangam ? What do you know ?” she asked in a tone of surprise.

“About what ?” I asked.

“Well, you have something in you which does surprise people. You are right, dear Rangam,” Manni said. “Your Anna is being elevated to the Bench. He got an offer from the Chief Justice to be a Judge of the High Court and after a great deal of hesitation, he has accepted. After all, our Sheela’s husband, Balu, has to grow in the profession. Anna’s legal work has become quite heavy and Balu can take it over and can have his home here when we move to

Madras. He has to face it some time and the earlier the better. He is turning out to be a good lawyer. So, Anna is thinking of leaving the cases to him — of course, his senior colleagues will help — and we should be in Madras in another three or four months. Perhaps, it may be more. It is not easy to wind up here. So, the announcement will come only a little later. How the devil did you guess, we cannot understand."

"Well, Jaana knows," I said laughing. "To tell you the truth, there was a look on your face which told me you had something up your sleeve. Even otherwise, you do look like a judge. There are some lawyers who are sworn to justice. I knew long ago you were one."

During my next visit, I was most thrilled to see my Sundaram teacher there. He had come to spend some time with Anna and Manni before they moved to Madras. Blood rushed to my head and tears welled up in my eyes for this was the first time I was seeing him after coming out of jail. He was now over sixty though he did not look his age. He was as happy when we met as I was though he is always a rather silent man. His face lighted up and I felt like going near him as I used to do when I was a girl and he was my teacher, but I was not young any more and I was a sophisticated middle-aged woman.

We had a wonderful week. We were always together and I told him all that happened to me in jail, except my secret which must go with me in smoke and ashes, when the time came for it. Grief and some kind of happiness filled me when he told me about my husband and he said he was very proud of me when my husband told him after all the cloud had gone that he knew I loved him and if nothing had happened, I would have done for him what he had done for my husband.

He was, along with his recovery, affected by a sense of guilt — "One cannot explain it," my teacher said. "I tried to tell him that he was not up to it at that stage to help you, but I could not shake him.

He would say, 'she would not have gone to jail but for me. She needn't have acted as she did if I had done my duty as a husband.' What could I do? It began to grow like an obsession. And when the news came about the new case in jail, he said he would rush to Madura and see Narayananna (Samban always referred to him that way) and all my efforts to stop him were in vain, though, truth to say, I was a little happy he had become so assertive. But he did not go to Narayananna. He went to jump into the flooded Vaigai river. He had pronounced the sentence on himself."

These were very sad moments for I was full of grief to think of him and to imagine that, having seen him desperate and pathetic in the witness box like a deserted orphan, I could not see him after he had gained his awareness, gave me great pain.

There were happy moments too, for he told me that he was always taken by surprise by my husband who began to "gallop" after a certain stage. "I have a feeling, Rangam," he explained, "the shock of seeing you in the dock, the shock of all that took place weighed on his mind, more than anyone knew. And, so, when the light came, it came like a blazing sun. It lighted up everything and, ironically, it brought also this retrospective sense of guilt. Life has its own ironies."

When we were talking, I used to look at his face, still full of love for me, I thought, and he would also now and then look at me and perhaps had the same feeling. Twenty-five years earlier, we might have been husband and wife if only....."

No, I would not look into the past. I should not. And there was Shyamali now, though I had not seen her still. My teacher told me that he had saved some money for a country-wide tour and had drawn up a big travel programme. In fact, he said, after some days in Madras, he would begin his tour. I spent a dreamy week in Madura and returned to Madras to my routine with a new sense of loneliness.

But some lives are destined to be eventful. That

was the way mine was ordained, I suppose. I wanted to get away from the past, but the past somehow caught up with me. For this was what happened the day after I returned to Madras.

The hostellers had come for lunch and gone and I was seated in my office room looking at the next day's schedule and writing out my instructions to the staff. I saw some one coming up. He was like a peon wearing a khaki shirt and some towel tied like a turban round his head.

He stepped in smiling.

"I knew I would find you," he said. "I am Pakkiri."

"I don't think I know you," I said. "Who are you? What can I do for you?"

"Oh, in your grand saree, golden ear-rings, gold-frame spectacles, you can't recognise me," he said. "But you may remember me," he said and took out his turban.

Drawn from his forehead right back over his bald head were two thick swollen lines. On a closer look, I noticed a few healed stitches over the left eye.

"I saw a man once strike and strike at a dog with a chain," he said looking sharply at me. "You did the same thing, struck me with a chain as if I were a dog."

It came to me in a flash. This was the man in the jail whom I had hit with the chain for which I was given an extended term of imprisonment. I had forgotten all about him — why, I was beginning to forget all about those jail days — and now recollected that, during the trial, his name was mentioned as Pakkiri-sami. The man had been sentenced to seven years for rape. What is it going to be now, God, I asked myself.

"I have been out many months," he said calmly. "and I have been busy. I went to a village where a young woman had killed two strong big men in cold blood with a crowbar. She had a child, a daughter. Then I went to another village whither I was directed to go, to know where the family which brought up the

child was. It was not difficult to find out information. The double-murder woman was famous and I was shown her uncle's house. But there was no one there. The man had died and his wife and children had gone to Bombay. Was I at a dead end, I thought.

"No, some neighbours were friendly and said that the killer woman's little child was adopted by a big lawyer who defended her in the Madura Court. It was thereafter easy going. I located the family in their big bungalow. The lawyer had two daughters, one an adopted daughter. They had both been married, the natural daughter was in the house with the lawyer and the adopted daughter had gone to north India, married to an I.A.S. officer, now a Sub-Collector in a place called Rampur. What about her mother? Oh, she was doing very well in Madras. She had become the Warden of a Women's college hostel in Madras city. I took the big wide open avenue to this quiet, nice place."

Now his voice changed. He was speaking through his teeth, spitting his words as it were :

"Now, mad woman, who refused to be wise in jail, and beat me with a chain as if I were a dog, you will pay the price. Your poor daughter does not know that she is the progeny of a killer, a double-killer, one who spent fifteen years in jail and was now masquerading like a respectable female as if she has something better than other women !"

I sat stunned. This was a mad man, a maniac whose weakness was raping women. I was alone, but he knew me. I would not be easy prey.

"What do you want?" I asked quietly asking myself whether I was going to have a fight on my hands again, whether he would kill me or I would kill him. I surveyed the table. There was a paper cutter, there were two glass paper weights, heavy but not enough to hit.

"You can't kill me," he said reading my mind. "I know you are a killer. I can kill you too. But I don't want my revenge that way. I want you to suffer as I suffered, more dead than alive. You nearly split

my skull, you damned woman. But I am not going to do that for you. I want to split your heart. You will pay the price in a different way when your respectable daughter tears her hair in disgrace. An I.A.S. officer's wife, the daughter of a killer! Yes, you respectable female, yes. I will make her kill herself, to atone for the shame. I know how to do it. It is my game to make women cringe."

This was blackmail and the man was a lunatic. There was no remedy except to kill. He was right. Shyamali would not be able to survive the shame. I must hold him, trick him and then silence him — and hang until I be dead. God — Oh, there is no God. There is only Fate. Spare me. Let me not kill again.

The fire has started. I can feel the smoke inside me. It is choking. Oh, what shall I do? I thought of Anna and Manni, my teacher and Shyamali — all in a flash. There is a man here trying to ruin my daughter's life.

Somehow, I knew it was always coming to that. All this kindness, all this good fortune — indeed the sky was too blue, too many flowers in bloom. By my Lord, I should have known all this would not last for you, Rangam, the bad woman! Well, to my job then, so God forgive me — Amen! I said to myself.

"Pakkiri," I called him. "you know very well, I could not help it that night. I was in jail, desperate, angry but not clever like you. You knew what you wanted, but we women were always chicken-hearted, scared that someone would come and molest us. You can understand that. And I have paid the price and now I have entered a new life. Can we make a deal?"

"What is it?" he asked indifferently.

"We want an additional gardener and I can make the appointment. You take up the job and we can live together here. We are both getting on in age. Is it not time to settle down?" I put it to him quietly,

"I know you, woman," he said. "I know women. I raped six, but got caught for only one and that was because of my greed. I liked her and was waiting for second run. She was a clever woman like you. She

said crying she was helpless, her husband would not come for another day. Damn her. I was taken in. I did not know she was play-acting. That devil came in half an hour, pinned me to the wall and hit me where it could kill. I howled in pain. And that woman raved in rage when I was taken away : "You will not go near another woman again — you scunk."

"Oh, no, darling Rangam, no. I will not be taken in. My code book says : A willing woman is a snake. No, I don't want your body. I want to burn up your soul. If you want to avoid that you have to kill me — I will not kill you. You have to pay the price, not I. Yes, kill, do it and there is a long letter I have written in three copies — one for the local rag, one for the great Collector's wife and one for your Students' Hostel Union. The girls here do not know that they are being fed by a killer with a blood-stained hand."

My fury was up again. I was trembling all over. Inside me was a blinding storm. Oh God what are you doing to me ? Jaana, Jaana, forgive me wherever you may be. Have I to stab your brother in the heart ? Oh, Anna, so much love, so much love — I clenched my fist, but there was no way out. No way, no way out — there was a drum beating in my mind.

No, I would not allow this man to do more harm to more people. I looked round. There was only a pick axe some distance away in the garden. My eyes must have looked wild as I was searching. The dog followed my eyes and, as I stood up, he took to his heels shouting : Don't worry. The letters were a lie. I shall do you the honour of going to Rampur myself and deliver my message personally to Madame Collector with proofs. Spare the noose of the jail. Better hang yourself. Your daughter will join you soon."

But I did not hear him. His words sounded like an echo. I was out of my wits. But, in a moment, I realized that nothing had happened. I sat still and collected my thoughts. The first thought that came to me was that I had been saved from a terrible, terrible crisis. Saved, saved ! I said to myself though that

spectre was before me. I sat down in my chair and drank a glass of water as my throat was dry.

Lord, how was it yesterday, how is it today? I told myself, nothing had happened. I had a reprieve. There was time to think. Jaana, I called in my mind. I almost laughed. "You have saved me. I am not a killer again. Anna need not give up his judgeship to defend a killer."

I sat in my chair for a long time thinking. Then I wrote a letter to the Principal saying that I had to go to Madura immediately for some days and I was leaving instructions for my work to be carried on by a senior student whom I had trained for emergencies. I had no alternative but to rush to Madura and put the problem to my brother. He may find a way. Is there a way out? On second thoughts, I did not want to rush there. The situation called for calmness, caution. I wrote to him that I was coming down and left two days later.

Chapter 12

Rangam came in, the day after we got her somewhat strange letter. From her appearance, I could see that something serious had happened. She was excited, nervous and agitated, though outwardly she was making a tremendous effort to appear calm.

"All well?" I asked.

"All well, Anna, now that I am here," she said.

Sundaram was staying with us and he came out of his room.

"What is it, Rangam? What has happened?" He asked with concern. "There has been no serious — er accident?"

"No, sir," she said and laughed (She always called him 'sir' as her teacher). "I have not killed anybody or even assaulted any one. I am still your and Anna's 'Rangam the redeemed.' You can have peace on that account."

"Then?" I asked, this time more anxiously because I was certain now that there was something.

"Where is Manni?" she asked. As my wife joined me, she said smiling: "Please don't be perturbed, all of you. There is something and I shall tell you. Let us go upstairs where we can talk freely."

Rangam was unusually calm, but I guessed, having known her under periods of great stress, that her calmness was always deceptive. The graver her thoughts, the calmer was her demeanour.

After we were seated in a corner (I bolted the door of the staircase) she said: "I am sorry I have to take you back to my jail days. The day after I reached Madras, I saw a spectre."

"To confess to you — I have to tell the truth. But for you, you Anna and Manni, and you, Sir, I might have had a different story to tell. But I think it was really Jaana, her spirit, which saved me. I cried out to her in my heart, 'Jaana, Jaana, save me for your dear brother's sake.' I was pulled back from

the edge of the precipice. Jaana did it.

"Before I come to the immediate crisis, let me tell you that this development had come in a long series of nightmares I have suffered for fifteen years. I can't tell about all that yet, but, in the light of what is happening or may happen, I must take you into confidence and say that I have put down all my thoughts and experiences in writing from time to time and hidden the sheets among my school notes. Since I was studying with special permission, my notes were not examined. Some day, you may read them and know why and how my life took the direction it did. As for the future, I do not know.

"To the point now. I was going to confess that I narrowly escaped being a killer again. Don't be shocked, Anna. I am not a maniac. I have my faculties fully under control. It was always so, even during the worst moment, as you know very well, Anna. I always acted only when I had to act. God gave me birth, you gave me rebirth. I am safe, let me assure you that again and again. But I was really in a crisis and I was helpless. I called to you all, each of you in my heart, to God who has been so unkind to me — and then I called out to Jaana. It was she who got me out — your Jaana, Anna. She did not want you to lose me.

"You remember that rapist in the jail. I saved myself and my two friends in our cell by hitting him with a chain, nearly killing him. The fellow is out now and I was in my office in the afternoon the day after I returned to Madras, when he came in, not very much in disguise. But it took some time for me to recognise him. He helped me, cynically, to remember him by removing his labourer's turban. I saw the thick two-line brand I had given him with the chain. They are there on his bald head, now like thick swollen nerves.

"He had no proposition. He had only a message. He had done a tremendous lot of detective work and found out the identity and the present whereabouts of Shyamali. He said he did not want to kill me, nor

even hurt me. But he wanted, he said, only to see my soul burn ! His message was that Shyamali would squirm and kill herself if and when she came to know that her mother was a murderer who killed two people and attacked another person in jail and had suffered imprisonment for fifteen years. And he told me while leaving, 'spare the noose of the jail and put one round your neck yourself.'

"You can imagine how I was shocked. I did not know what to do. 'I won't kill you,' he said. 'and there is no use in killing me, as I shall prove to you presently. I am now going to Rampur and you wait to hear further news.'

"I was scared, enraged. What could I do ? Poor Shyamali, he was right. It would shock her. I am not any more a young person and was trembling all over. He was mocking me and the devil was rising in me — and then it was like lightning flashes and thunder claps. My mind shouted to you all and to Jaana — 'Jaana, Jaana wherever you may be, save me — let me not be a killer again.' He saw me looking round for a weapon and, most unexpectedly, took to his heels shouting — I shall stop only when I reach Rampur.

"I think, Anna, you were all there in spirit to help me, save me, Jaana particularly. I really did not expect that reptile to go away like that. He ran as if someone was chasing him. It took me some time to recover, and realize that nothing untoward had happened. Then, I wrote that letter to you and took leave from the Principal."

That was what Rangam told us and I was very glad to hear it. As she feared, anything could have happened. Finding some sunshine after years of suffering, she must have felt that the ground was slipping under her feet and the tragedy of her story bringing a shock to her daughter.

Now the question was how to meet the situation. There was no answer to a blackmailer. What the fellow said was correct. Poor Shyamali would be in a miserable plight. Our social code has not accepted

the truth that the sins of fathers should not be visited on the children.

My wife is not very emotional but this was the first time she was coming face to face with Rangam's tragic legacy and she was greatly agitated. I thought of some legal action against the blackmailer but a black mailer's biggest weapon was the threat of publicity, especially when, as in the case of this fellow, the motive was not money but revenge. In my heart I feared whether Rangam, although now calm, might try to end the problem by suicide. She might think that this might lighten the agony for Shyamali. I noted that I must warn my wife not to leave her alone even for a minute.

Sundaram, after listening to Rangam's narrative, remained silent for a while. Then he said that he would like to go into it in full detail. "Let us cut the emotional part out of it," he said. "How did this interview go?" He asked Rangam to narrate the whole event again without omitting any detail. "Let us have an assessment of the man ourselves. Black-mailers, especially the more over-confident ones, do commit some mistakes."

So for an hour, we sat and we cross-questioned Rangam. As we got talking, Rangam became calm. Perhaps, I felt, she had been caught by what is called emotional fatigue. She had become apathetic to anything happening to her or anyone else. Looking at her face, however, I did not think that she was disinterested. She was also thinking.

Sheela and Balu, who had gone out returned, with my grandson and this made any further talk impossible. We came downstairs and Sheela was surprised to see Rangam as she had returned to Madras only three days previously. "I took some leave," Rangam told her, "as you are all leaving and Sundaram uncle has come."

That night, my wife slept in Rangam's room on my plea that I would like to be with Sundaram and exchange ideas with him. Actually, what I had given as an excuse for not leaving Rangam alone did lead

to an extremely earnest talk and it was about two in the morning when my wife came in and asked me whether we were going to make an all night affair of it.

But, by that time, we had come to two conclusions. One was that the wisest and most practical course would be to take Shyamali into confidence and tell her the whole story. Coming from us, it would lose its blackmail edge and then, if she liked, she could meet her mother. In any case, a shock would be averted and she was old enough to know and accept the inescapable realities.

I had never been a prosecuting lawyer, my forte being defence. But I noted that the fellow had told Rangam (this came from Sundaram's asking for a detailed report from Rangam) that he had molested six women. So, we came to the second point of our action. I told Sundaram that I would refer back to his case and see whether there were any references to his other crimes or any such crimes had been registered at all. If a crime had been registered, it was up to the police to take it up for investigation when some evidence became available.

I told my wife and Rangam the next morning that we would consult some colleagues who had specialised in blackmail cases and work out a plan. Sundaram accordingly accompanied me to my chambers and we attempted to contact Shyamali on the trunk telephone. News had got about one way and another in higher circles about my expected elevation to the High Court Bench and when I contacted the local chief of telephones seeking some special help for an effort to be made to contact Shyamali in Rampur, he was only too ready to oblige. Before noon, we managed to get Shyamali on the line. I asked Sundaram to speak to her (as I was not calm enough to do so) and say we wished her to fly down immediately to Madras as there were some urgent family problems. She was greatly concerned, but Sundaram told her there was nothing serious to worry about but she must come. She said she would have to go to Delhi and take the

plane to Madras. Sundaram replied that she should work out all that in consultation with Madhu but she must reach Madras as soon as possible. He allayed her agitation once again by saying that there was nothing to worry, but she had to come as her help was necessary. She should be able to reach Madras by plane the next day. He said that it was difficult to explain on the phone, but Mama would meet her at the airport at Madras the next day.

It was a brief but sharp message which Sundaram delivered and we were laughing as we drove back home about the high drama which we were being drawn into. The crisis feeling had gone since somehow we felt assured in our minds that Shyamali, being an affectionate girl, would accept the situation and everything would work out all right.

That night I left by train for Madras saying that I would try to meet the Chief Justice. I could see that Rangam was becoming concerned, no tangible avenue of action having opened itself. She was rather taken aback when Sundaram told her — he could not bear to see her miserable — that they had decided to take Shyamali into confidence and felt assured that that would be the best course possible.

"Let us wait for Nana to return from Madras," Sundaram told her. "In the meanwhile, we are trying to immobilise the fellow."

This we had already done. As soon as I reached the office, I had told the Senior Superintendent of Police (who congratulated me on my "well merited" elevation to the High Court) about the bragging by Pakkirisami to one of my acquaintances about his rape exploits and suggested to him that it would be worthwhile starting an investigation on some of the old registered cases which remained unsolved. "We shall get the information out of the fellow himself," the S.S.P. had said. I understood that he would be taken into custody immediately.

The Delhi plane was due only in the evening and in that state of restlessness, I felt I could not be alone. I thought I would pay my respects to the Chief

Justice, having come to Madras, but when I phoned, I was told he was out of station. Then in a quirk, I thought of Mr. Justice Kamath who had tried Rangam's case and was a Judge of the High Court now. Very soon he would be my colleague and I felt I might spend some time with him.

He was, I found, equally eager to see me and asked me to join him at lunch. He had an English wife. He was much younger to me but had been promoted to the High Court as I.C.S. judicial officers always enjoyed a preference and Mr. Kamath had also distinguished himself as a brilliant Judge.

He came out to the veranda with his wife to greet me. She was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, very youngish though she must have been in her forties. English women, who married Indians, generally tried to Indianise themselves by wearing Indian dresses and fancied sarees, but this gracious lady wore her frock and, as I said, she looked very pretty in it.

Mr. Kamath was a very lively talker though he was completely anglicised like most I.C.S. officials and, with his English wife, he looked really like an Englishman with his very fair, almost whitish complexion.

The most surprising but pleasant part of this meeting was his reference to Rangam. He asked me whether I remembered the Rangam case and disclosed that the Women's College Principal had made a secret reference to him about Rangam before appointing her as Warden of their hostel. He had given a good recommendation following up his remark he had incorporated in the judgement and declaring that she had fulfilled his hopes regarding her rehabilitation by educating herself, indeed most creditably while in jail.

"Shastri, I don't know whether you remember. I had been barely three years a District Judge when her case came up. You know we people in the Service are trained as administrators and while sitting on that case, my instincts as an administrator were constantly at war with my obligations as a Judge.

"Do you remember the details?" he asked me.

"You may regard it as odd," I told him. "I took up that case voluntarily because Rangam had very much reminded me of my sister who had died in an accident when we were both very young. When I came to know her more and more, this impression grew stronger. When she got into trouble, all my sympathies were with her and in my mind I adopted her as my sister. And now on release from jail, she has been with us. She has really filled a void in my life. Such a fine, intelligent, witty, sparkling girl; What a pity a cruel fate played with her in such a way that she had to spend many years in jail."

"Now I can understand why you could not get at the truth," Mr. Kamath remarked. "The fact is, looking at her with a brother's eyes you could not face the reality. I could see that she had a very good reason to kill those people."

I was wondering what he was getting at and he saw that and continued :

"The point is, Mr. Shastri, seated in a Judge's chair, we do face a situation often of law being at cross purposes with justice. (I remembered what I had told the Prosecutor). That was my first big case and, after the trial had closed, I was faced with this conflict. Caryl was away in England and I had no one even to talk to at home confidentially. You handled the case brilliantly and I was inclined to call you privately for a chat, but refrained myself since I was the Judge and you were the defence lawyer."

"I concluded that this woman had a good reason to do what she did. It was her right as a woman to defend herself. I was convinced that I could acquit her. But there were two obstacles. One was the law; motivation had not been fully proved though I was certain in my mind that she had a strong and right motivation. But that did not come out. So, the law called for conviction."

"I had a rather odd feeling that what was more important was the woman's own attitude. I have kept among my personal records a detailed note on this case

that they were making the appointment. Her being there did not, therefore, surprise me, but she was pale with agitation and emotion. She was meeting me for the first time after the last day in the Court and, poor woman, she must have been confused. When the Principal introduced her as Mrs. Sambasivan, Hostel warden, she looked down obviously nervous to look at me, and I said : Oh, Ranganayaki Sambasivan."

"You have met her ?" the Principal asked.

"Why, her name is in that College Handbook you gave me. Didn't I go through it ? - It is an old habit of mine, remembering names. I also remember faces. Sometimes, I wonder, whether I might have fared better as a lawyer. I have a knack of getting at the truth — even out of very determined tight lips. She looked up when I said that — just as I expected !"

"I was pleased at seeing her so well established and I wanted to tease her a bit and, going round the hostel, I went on talking. She gradually came out of her deep-freeze, warmed up and became enthusiastic forgetting herself, I am very glad, Mr. Shastri, I was able to do some good for her. When her full story becomes known—I am not sure this will happen — there will be a lot of sympathy for her. It was really a pleasure to talk to her and hear her talk. I did not want to keep talking to her, however, as that would embarrass her and I left with my good wishes to the institution with every expression of conventional propriety."

I was thrilled and proud to hear him speak of Rangam with such interest and goodwill. Indeed, I was happy she was finding her feet. She had undoubtedly greatly pleased the Judge.

I remembered what Rangam was telling us once when Chachu and I were having some light talk with her. I asked her why so many people were friendly to her, when in the naive, artless style of Jaana, she said laughing ; "From my younger days, Anna, I used to feel people loved to hear me talk — God knows I needed that boost in those days, my aunt eating out my nerves at home. I did not know whether it was

because of what I had to say or my eagerness and curiosity or some mannerism I had. Only in later years in retrospect, I began to realize, more than listening to me, they were looking at me and I used to feel funny, with some kind of a delayed blushing. Can you believe it, Manni? I had a very dear friend in our village and her husband was the only friend my husband had, who would talk to him and listen to him in a friendly sort of way. She told me one day with shocking frankness : "I have been looking at you, Rangam, rather brazenly while you were talking all the time you have been here. It is not what you say, I suppose, but it is your style, the way you talk or may be, it is your voice. You do attract people." There was comedy in it — and as you know very well, there was also tragedy in it. I had plenty of time to think of it in jail — some kind of a fatality, isn't it? I am not a philosopher, Anna. That was why I always liked company. Even in jail, I had friends."

In the flood of a whole lot of thoughts, happy and sad, I waited at the airport for the Delhi plane bringing Shyamali. She heaved a sigh of relief when she saw me and said she and Madhu had feared that I was seriously ill and it was because I was ill, Sundaram uncle had spoken on the phone. I assured her that everyone was fine but we wanted her to come immediately because we came to know that, on account of some old enmity, a dangerous criminal had bragged that he was coming to Rampur to hurt you.

"What is this drama?" she exclaimed. "Somebody is coming to Rampur?"

"Yes, we are trying to catch him but that may take a little time, say three or four days. So we wanted you to come here. We are also a little selfish. You have been away for more than a year. So we could also see you."

We took the night train to Madura and though the train was more than an hour late, as the car had met us at the station, we were home before 8 a.m. Shyamali, as was her way, jumped out of the car and rushed into the drawing room. She suddenly halted.

"Am . . ma" she cried out and ran to Rangam, who got up shocked. Shyamali hugged her with tears flowing and kissed her all over the face, felt her face and hair, drew her face back, looked at Rangam and again tightly embraced her crying 'Amma . . Amma'. She could not say anything more. Rangam was taken completely by surprise. The arrangement we had made was that she should remain upstairs and, after we had told the story to Shyamali, she should meet Rangam if all went well. Rangam had apparently sat on in the drawing room after her morning coffee as the train was late, wondering what would happen.

At last, Rangam looked at her daughter and asked with a choked voice : "How did you recognise me, child ?" It is more than twenty years since you saw me and you were barely four years then."

"Amma, you have never been away from me. I could also be silent like you. No one knew you were always in my mind. I never showed my grief. I understood even when I came here I should keep this memory to myself as Mama and Mami would be very unhappy if they suspected that I was grief-stricken.

"Amma — call me Chomu, Amma, at least once as you used to. Let me hear it again. I feel so guilty I have grown so big. I can't know your petting any more."

Rangam who had controlled herself till then broke down covering her face.

"Chomu, I do think of you all the time. But I am a sinner, Chomu. I have been a bad mother, a bad woman."

Shyamali got up and shook Rangam by her shoulders with both her hands. "You have been brave, Amma. You don't know how proud of you I have been all these years — all in secret of course. I did not know how to request Mama to tell me how to meet you. I did not want to do so till I had taken Madhu into confidence. I did not want him to get a shock."

I turned round and looked at Sundaram as if to say : "There is nothing for us to do now."

"Mama, I am sorry. You must forgive me. I could not tell you. It was so difficult and painful. I feared that it would upset everything here. Now, my precious, my noble, brave mother is back with her Chomu, I shall tell you the whole story from the beginning.

"It is true I was only four years old when the tragedy started. But there are some impressions, some pictures which stick to a child's mind. Even Amma does not know that I know."

Rangam stared anxiously at her wondering what Shyamali was going to say. Shyamali was seated at Rangam's feet, having slipped down after embracing and kissing her mother like a child.

"Amma, don't feel too bad. I woke up from sleep, perhaps disturbed by some noise. I thought it was in the kitchen. I lay quietly for some time and then got up and came to the kitchen. There was a man standing tying his veshti and you were lying there on the ground and I thought you were there dead. I thought he had beaten you and you had fallen down. I was in terror that the man would beat me and kill me if I made any noise. So I hid behind the door. Then he stood there for a minute and smiled—it was a sneer—at you and went away through the back door. Then I slowly came near and saw that your face was all wet, your hair untied and spread on the floor and you were asleep. I shook you and started crying. Then, suddenly you woke up. You were in a daze. You did not recognise me at first. Then you exclaimed : "Chomu". You hastily got up, rearranged your saree and went out in a hurry but soon come back. I was crying. Then you hugged me saying : 'Chomu, Chomu, don't cry. I am here. I am all right'."

That was the picture. It meant nothing to me at the time. But as I grew in years, the picture with its full significance came to me. I had recognised the man—that mad man Satthi who used to smile at everybody. I asked you once or twice what happened. You said I must have dreamt something and added

that nothing had happened. Yes, I did believe that I had some dream. But later, many years later, I knew what had happened. I knew that the man had molested you. Then, that other picture also got its meaning — your coming with the crowbar and bashing that fellow's head. It was a terrible picture then. I shuddered and feared and wondered what had happened to you. Then you came back quietly through the kitchen to the back sit-out, sat leaning against the wall and caressed me. 'Don't weep, Chomu,' you told me. "Never, never weep. If you weep, nobody will like you. If you are nice, every one will be nice to you. And don't tell any one anything. Just keep happy and smiling. My Chomu, even if I am not with you, don't cry. People will not like you if you cry." Those were your last words to me. I remembered and repeated them often in my mind whenever I felt I would cry.

"I saw father in a state of shock. He would pet me often, but he never held my interest as he could not talk as you could. Then when you got up, I was about to cry but remembered what you said. I was terrified when the police came. I saw you calmly go to the pooja corner and you did your namaskaram to Appa. And they put the handcuffs on you.

"Oh, Amma," she began to cry hysterically catching hold of Rangam's hands. "How did you bear it?" It took a long time for Shyamali to control herself.

"I did not know the significance of all that then. The whole story came to me in retrospect — years, years later. Then I was taken to Thatha* and I vaguely remember him and then came here. Then there was a blank. But occasionally I would hear some whispers between Mama and Mami about his having been to the jail: "Rangam is all right," he would say. I never overheard, I knew it was wrong, but such little bits of talk did occasionally catch my ears and I knew, mama, you were talking about my mother. But I was afraid to ask.

* Grand father.

"But when the second incident took place in jail, I was nearly twelve. I carefully read the newspapers regularly. Occasionally, you would tell Mami; "look at Shyamali, she is spending so much time with the newspapers and then Mami would say, let her be happy. She is doing very well in the class like Sheela. No one knew that I was following the case. I registered all the facts. It concerned you, my dearest Amma. Who was more important to me than you? But I held my tongue. I always remembered your words. Moreover, there was nothing for me to say or do.

"I was about to talk only when I heard Mama say to Mami one day, 'Samban is dead. He committed suicide.' I quietly went away to the bath room and cried and cried. But nobody knew. Poor father. He was so sweet though everyone made fun of him.

"As the years went by and I became an adult, I looked back and the significance of all the events came back, all in its place and with their full meaning. Amma, the judge who tried your case, you Mama, were all bewildered and confused why you struck in such savage fashion on Satti and his friend. You were discussing the case vehemently one day with someone. "What shall I do with this girl? She won't talk. You were angry and you were sorry. The reason apparently — 'apparently', you said that — was they wanted to abduct the child, that is, me. But you said there was more in it than met the eye, but she would not speak. There was no witness, no evidence.

"But there was one witness and that was your four year old Chomu, my dearest, precious Amma. I was a witness to your humiliation about which you would not talk to any one. Perhaps, some others might have cried and raved, but you were you, a brave woman without a parallel.

"I am proud of you, Amma. All that you suffered has made you nobler, a greater mother to me and that is what I told Madhu and he agreed with me.

Rangam sat patiently. There were no tears in her eyes. Suddenly, they had dried up. Then she looked at me.

I was in what you might call a state of shell shock. So, that was Rangam's story and this extraordinary daughter of hers had known it all and, strangely for a girl who was gay, playful and light-hearted as we thought her to be, had maintained such masterful silence. I did not know whom to admire more, the mother or the daughter. Then I recollected Judge Kamath's comments. He had guessed it but when he found I had no such suspicion, he quietly slurred over the sad episode.

At last Sundaram who seldom laughs, laughed out : "Do you know, Shyamali, why we made that trunk call to you and asked you to come ?"

Shyamali stared with an unuttered query.

"There was a blackmailer — the man your mother punished deservedly in jail, the mad rapist — came to her four days ago — four days ago ! my Lord, what all has happened in four days ? — it looks like four years. He said he would inform you that your mother was an ex-criminal and, on hearing that, you will put a noose round your neck ! So we called you gently to break the news to you. But you poured such a story on us that we would have looked not like carrying coal to Newcastle but sunlight to the sun ! You have beaten us, dear child. Of course, you are Rangam's daughter. There is that fact."

The following week was hilarious. Shyamali would not leave her mother for a minute and slept near her bed, made her comb her hair and everything Rangam would have done to her during all the years she had missed. "I am proud" — those were the only words on her lips.

The details of Rangam's story were thus filled up and Shyamali also came to know for the first time that Rangam's life might have been different if only Sundaram had done what he longed to do. Shyamali was surprised. "So you too are a bad man like my mother ? But you know Sundaram mama, my appa was a very good man, he was very kind, very loving and he worshipped my mother."

Then we told her the full story about Samban.

We did not know that Samban during the years we thought he was a nit-wit had earned his daughter's love so much. Shyamali covered her face on her mother's lap and cried as if her heart would break. A father cannot have a more endearing epitaph.

Two nights later, Rangam was with us talking about the future. In the course of the talk, Sundaram's name came up and we felt sorry to see him lonely and desolate at his age. What was he going to do? Then I told her boldly: "Rangam, he is past sixty and you are past forty. Your life has been chequered, so star-crossed that it will not be wrong if you both spend the evening of your lives together. You can go with him and you have our blessing."

Rangam had a soft smile on her face. "You are right, Anna," she said. "You are right. I owe a great deal to my dear teacher. He was everything to me till I had to leave for Tiruchuzhi. But, Anna, my husband had only me as his friend. He would not say anything, because he could not. But I knew what was in his mind. I was his life's breath.

"When Sundaranna — I would call him that now since my husband called him that way — brought him out of the clouds, his one thought was about me. His sense of guilt, his concern, his agony to make amends was such that when he got the shock of my second case, he could not bear it. He killed himself. I loved him, Anna. We became one, heart, body and soul. He is gone, but his memory fills my heart. I am not, therefore, alone. Yes, everything may have been different, but that did not come about. My beloved teacher, patron and friend cannot be anything more to me in this life."

My wife embraced Rangam with tears in her eyes and said that we knew that this was what she would say, but merely wanted to tell her that we would not stand in her way if she chose to be with Sundaram and share the rest of her life with him.

Two days later, Sundaram said he would be leaving for Madras en route to Bombay. Shyamali said she had also to go back to Rampur and put Madhu

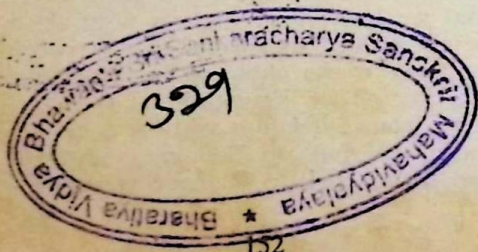
at ease though she had written to him briefly about what had happened. Shyamali said she would be with her mother in Madras for a few days.

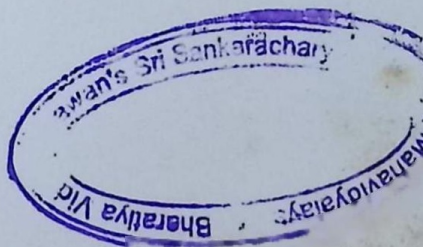
We bade a sad farewell to Sundaram. He said he would write to us from time to time about his whereabouts. We had given him a hint about our talk with Rangam and he said he knew what she would say. "I can never cease to be proud of her. Haven't I told you there are no two Rangams in this world. I knew she would do what she should as a true Hindu wife."

Rangam and Shyamali were with us for three more days. Shyamali wanted Rangam to go with her to Rampur but Rangam said: "No, Chomu, let me be alone for the present. It will take some more time for me to wake up. It has all been a turbulent dream."

Before they left, Rangam gave the key of her box and told me that I might look into the papers which were her notings in the jail. She used to write in the form of reveries, sometimes short, sometimes long. "There is no secret now, Anna. Shyamali has said everything. But you may like to know, for, after all, I am your Jaana to you. No brother could have done more to his sister. As long as blood is warm in my veins, I shall be Jaana to you and Manni. Now, I know, God never left any orphans. They always found their fathers and mothers—and brothers."

When the train steamed off and Rangam and Shyamali waved goodbye to us, I whispered to my wife: "Rangam, the bad woman! What a paradox. It is indeed a topsy turvy world."





A DEEPLY TOUCHING STORY OF GRIPPING EMOTIONS

Rangam of the poorer respectable middle class but a pretty woman of vivacity and brilliance suffers deep distress and tribulations, for no fault of hers except that she is attractive. A hapless victim, her secret haunts her. She does not speak out. Society and law turn against her not knowing the reality — her reticence firmly based on the doctrine "crucify thy flesh for thy sin."

Was Rangam a bad woman? She throws a challenge.

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